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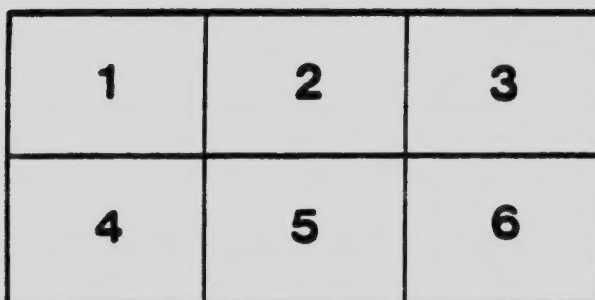
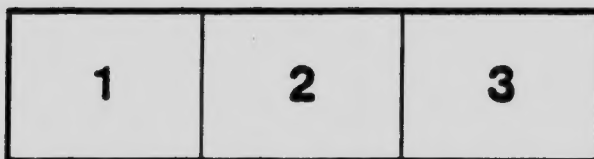
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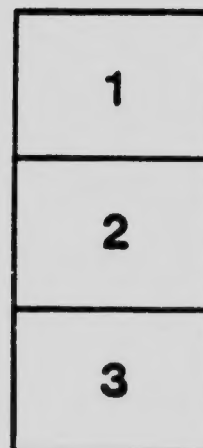
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THE BACCHANTE AND THE NUN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE GARDEN OF ALLAH

FELIX: THREE YEARS IN A LIFE

THE WOMAN WITH THE FAN

THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

THE DWELLER ON THE THRESHOLD

THE WAY OF AMBITION

IN THE WILDERNESS

BARBARY SHEEP

TONGUES OF CONSCIENCE

BYEWAYS

AFTER THE VERDICT

THE GOD WITHIN HIM

THE BACCHANTE AND THE NUN

BY
ROBERT HICHENS

*"Deux êtres luttent dans mon cœur.
C'est la bacchante avec la nonne.
L'une est simplement bonne,
L'autre ivre de vie et de pleurs."*

LA COMTESSE DE NOAILLES

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THE BACCHANTE AND THE NUN



CHAPTER I

"**W**HAT about Jane Valmont? Would she do? She's dark and effective. She's got fine eyes and a splendid figure. Men like her. She's chock full of sex. And she isn't so infernally expensive as some of 'em. Really the way these girls—and old women too—who've got names open their mouths nowadays is simply sickening."

Leslie Grant leaned back in his round backed chair, fixed his large plaintive brown eyes on the pale dark young man opposite to him, and played with a paper-knife. The dark young man wrinkled his forehead, touched his little black moustache with a thin forefinger, and seemed to be considering the matter, giving his mind to it.

"What do you say, Jack?" added Grant, after a moment, to a big, burly man of about fifty, with a big clean-shaven deceitful looking face, dissipated sly eyes surrounded by pouches and lines, and a mouth to beware of. "Would Valmont do? She wouldn't ask more than fifty pounds a week. She's mad to come to us. I know that."

"So's everybody!" said Jack Champion, famous in theatre land as a shrewd and daring man with plenty of money behind him and unbounded energy.

"Can she act? That's the question," said the dark young man, in a defiant, and yet rather discouraged voice, looking quickly from one of the joint managers of the Central Theatre to the other.

"The question isn't so much can she act as can she draw," said Champion, inflexibly, even with a certain brutality. "I'm not at all certain about this play of yours, Mr. Dale, not at all certain."

He looked hard at the author.

"In my opinion it'll want a lot of bolstering up with names

and scenic effects if it's to pull 'em in. We've got to take at least three thousand a week if we're to do any good. That means that we've got to have at least six full houses in eight performances, jammed houses. If we trust only to the play we're as likely as not to get left."

"You're right there, Jack," said Grant, suddenly blowing out his plump yellow cheeks.

"If you don't believe in the play," said Martin Dale, stiffening, but speaking in a steady, deliberately calm voice, "Why did you accept it?"

"Well, for one thing we couldn't find anything else," said Champion. "Could we, Lez?"

"No. There's plenty of muck about, but one may read plays for months without finding a winner."

"I suppose you thought there was something in my play or surely——"

"My dear chap," said Grant good-naturedly. "Don't get your rag out. We're not accusing you. Your play may come out all right at rehearsal. I only hope to God it does. But it's on the heavy side, and——"

"Heavy! It deals with a serious subject."

"Exactly! And that's against it."

"I can't really see why. How can you get strong drama out of a frivolous subject?"

"Ask me another. Well, Jack, what do you think about Valmont? Think she'd do?"

"She's a bit skinny, isn't she?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've seen skinnier. Remember, she'll take fifty a week."

"That's all right. But the question is——"

"The question is, can she play the part I've written," suddenly interjected young Dale, with a fierceness almost tragic.

"Oh, there are a dozen actresses in London who could play the part on their heads if it comes to that," said Champion, carefully lighting a cigar. "Just press the bell, will you, Lez. I want a whisky and soda."

"So do I."

Grant pressed the bell by his side with a flat, short nailed thumb. He was a short, fat, podgy, yellowish man, with almost white hair, thick lips, a broad soft-looking nose, and brown eyes that could smile, but that sometimes, startlingly, held an almost tragically imaginative look. He

attended to the scenic side of the great theatre and was a famous "producer."

A very thin young Jew hurried in, looking feverishly alive.

"Mr. Grant?"

"Bring three whiskies and sodas, will you, Meyer?"

"Certainly, Mr. Grant."

The young Jew flew out on surely winged feet that seemed shod with silence.

"I can't agree with you, Mr. Champion," said Dale, directly he was gone, with a sort of embittered determination.

"Agree with me? What about?"

"That there are a dozen actresses in London who could play the part of Magdalen Smith on their——"

"By the way," interrupted Grant. "We must change the name. Smith's too common. They're thousands of Smiths. What shall we call her?"

"I can't have the name altered. I wish it to be common."

"Why?" said Champion. "What's the object of that?"

"Because I intend her to be a star in a dust heap."

"Star in a—I say, that's a bit far fetched! What do you say, Lez? Think they'll get that?"

But at this juncture Meyer slipped in with the drinks, and the joint managers of the Great Central Theatre became really interested in what they were doing for a moment.

"Not too much soda, Meyer!"

"No, Mr. Champion."

"Drink up, Mr. Dale."

"Thanks very much, but I'm not——"

"Here's luck!"

"Oh, well! The same to you!"

"Of course Valmont's never done anything really big, Jack. But she'd look it all right. And she gets sex over."

"What about Averil Mulholland?" said Champion.

"She's a splendid actress!" broke in Dale, who hadn't been addressed. "She's got intellect, and——"

"Oh—intellect!" said Grant, lighting a cigarette. "Much the British Public cares about that! Mulholland's got no more sexual appeal than that chair."

"I'm sick of sexuality."

"That's all right, my boy. But your play won't run a week unless we get plenty of it over. The women want it. And it's the women who matter to us."

"Miss Mulholland's the most accomplished actress we——"

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"How about Maud Eden, Jack? She's a pretty little thing, and she's got a big following among the matinée girls."

"What would she want?"

"She'd probably ask two hundred a week. . . ."

"Oh, God!"

"And take a hundred and twenty."

"I couldn't accept her," said Dale. "She's hopelessly suburban."

"Suburban! All the better! The suburbs will eat her."

"I couldn't——"

"You don't think we're going to depend on the highbrows of Mayfair and Chelsea for our audiences, do you? They wouldn't give us a week's run."

"I have it in my contract, Mr. Champion, that I'm to approve the cast. Miss Eden has a cockney accent."

"I've never noticed it. Anyhow, she can act."

"That may be. But she's essentially common."

"She's a lovely girl. Look at her legs!"

"Legs! I want brain and emotion. I want a woman who can suggest the pursuit of the ideal."

"What's that?"

Here Grant broke in with:

"Maud Eden can look ideal all right. She's got the longest eyelashes of any actress in London."

"That's nothing to do with it."

"Let's ask Meyer!" suddenly said Champion, as if seized by a happy idea. "Press the bell, Lez, will you?"

The fat thumb went once more to the bell.

"Ask Meyer what?" exclaimed Dale, beginning to perspire.

"You'll see in a minute," said Champion. "Here, Meyer!"

"Shall I bring some more drinks, Mr. Champion?"

"No—yes, you may as well. But stop a minute first."

"Yes, Mr. Champion."

The young Jew paused by the table in a pouncing attitude.

"You get about a good bit, Meyer; one way and another, I suppose you've seen most of the London actresses, eh?"

"I should say, Mr. Champion."

Champion sent a shrewd glance to Grant.

"What d'you think of Miss Mulholland, eh?"

"Cold, Mr. Champion. She doesn't heat you up. No suggestion of sex."

"There you are, Mr. Dale!"

Dale writhed with exquisite scorn, but said nothing.

"D'you like Maud Eden?"

Meyer's bright little eyes flew from right to left and back again. A faint smacking sound came from his humid lips.

"Ah, there's a girl a fellow would like to—I mean she's great, Mr. Champion. All the chaps are keen on her. Look at her figure! Look at her legs! I'm told the shops sell a hundred photos of her to one of any other actress you can mention."

"Mr. Dale here says she's suburban."

Meyer raised his heavy black eyebrows.

"Indeed! I'm sure I beg pardon, Mr. Dale, all my friends think her the first actress we have."

Martin Dale got up abruptly from his chair. As he did so he opened his mouth, kept it open for an instant, then shut it with an audible snap of his white teeth.

"Why was I such a damned fool as to write another play and get it accepted?" he thought.

He went over to one of the two long windows in the room and stared out into the sunlit street. Although the Central Theatre stood in the very heart of London the street looked like a slum. Dale smelt, or imagined he smelt, an odour of vegetables. Surely the warm air was impregnated with cabbage! And so that infernal little Jew boy was called in to—no, it shouldn't be!

He swung round.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Champion, but my contract gives me the right to exercise supervision over the cast of my play. Miss Maud Eden may appeal to a certain public, but she doesn't appeal to me. I don't admire her as an actress and I must object to her being given the part of Magdalen Smith."

"We can't have Smith!" murmured Leslie Grant, looking at his short nails.

Champion stared for a moment. His crafty eyes gazed out from a face of stone.

"That'll do, Meyer," he then said.

"Right, Mr. Champion. I'll bring——"

"No, I'll ring when we want them."

"Certainly, Mr. Champion."

When the door shut behind Meyer's markedly Jewish back Champion said:

"Very well, Mr. Dale. You refuse to have Miss Eden, one of the biggest draws in London, for the lead. We must

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ask you to suggest someone else whom you think suitable for the part. But mind this, Mr. Grant here and I must approve of her. Our last show was a failure. We can't afford to have another on top of it. Whom d'you want? Out with it!"

He stared, and Grant stared too, but with more sympathetic eyes.

"I don't want anyone in particular."

"Oh. I thought you'd got some girl up your sleeve."

"Nothing of the sort!" said Dale hotly. "I don't mix up art and—and—sex stuff."

"Then you're about the only playwright in London that doesn't, I should say," said Champion, blandly.

"If I'm to choose straight away I should say engage Miss Mulholland."

"I veto her!" said Grant. "I wouldn't give her twenty pounds a week in any theatre of mine."

"Very well then!" said Dale, throwing out his hands.

A long silence followed, only broken for an instant by Leslie Grant gently sucking his false teeth.

"What's to be done?" at last said Grant in an unperturbed voice.

"Done? Mr. Dale must find someone for us and be quick about it. We must start rehearsing Monday morning. To-day's Thursday."

"Well, Mr. Dale? What d'you say?"

"I'll do my best."

"Haven't you anyone at all in mind?" asked Grant, with a sort of fat gentleness that wasn't unsympathetic.

"Really I haven't. But I'll find someone."

He paused, then repeated, as if to reassure himself:

"I'll find someone."

"And remember this, Mr. Dale," said Champion, with authority, "none of your intellectuals will go down here. We cater for the big public. Women who are successful in holes and corners are no good to us. We don't want soulful girls who play Ibsen and Tchekov and God knows what in bandboxes. We want someone who'll make the last boy in the gallery know he's a he-man. Understand?"

"Oh, yes! I understand!" said Dale desperately.

CHAPTER II

ON the same day, about half-past four, a taxicab stopped before the door of a house in Westminster, and the short, broad figure of Martin Dale got out quickly.

"One moment," he said to the chauffeur.

And he pressed the bell.

A woman servant came in a moment, and he asked her:

"Is Mrs. Sartoris at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's good!"

Dale turned round and paid the chauffeur, and gave him a shilling for himself.

"Hot, isn't it?" he said to the maid, as he stepped into the hall and laid down his soft hat and his stick.

"Very hot, sir," she agreed, but noticing with some surprise the beads of perspiration on his broad forehead.

"We ought all to be out of London."

"Mrs. Sartoris only came back to-day, sir, and is leaving again for Sharnley Green on Saturday."

"Then I'm lucky. I was awfully afraid I shouldn't find her."

The maid led the way upstairs to a long low-ceilinged Adams drawing-room and went to find her mistress. A moment later a rather large woman of perhaps forty-five, with a handsome, authoritative head, steady turquoise blue eyes, a clear white complexion and grey hair, came in, looking kind, but unsmiling.

"Have some tea?" she said, in a grave, clear voice, holding out a capable, not small hand, a hand that looked generous.

"No thanks. I've just been trying to make things go by drinking whiskies and sodas."

"Make things go?"

She sat down on a large chintz-covered sofa, and he sat down by her.

"Yes. I thought I was happy when the management at the Central accepted my play for the autumn season."

"Well, it was splendid, wasn't it?"

"Splendid! You've never been in the claws of the managers."

"Because I've no gift of creation. But I love the drama, and the enticement of the theatre is strong upon me."

"That's why I've come to you to-day. I'm in a quandary. I've had an awful time this afternoon at the theatre. I've lost my temper. I've been rude without intending to be. I've—I've perspired with fury."

"I believe I'm rude too, sometimes."

"But surely not by accident? You're not so weak as all that."

"But to be rude with intention is morally more blameworthy than——"

"I know, I know. But the unforgivable sin is weakness."

"What's happened?"

"I'll tell you briefly."

He told her. She listened, keeping her blue eyes steady. A faint look of disgust came on her face as he talked, eagerly, evidently seeking sympathy with an energy almost greedy.

"And so now I've got to find an actress who'll do, who'll more than do if possible, and I must find her at once. If only they'd take Miss Mulholland! I happen to know she's free."

Mrs. Sartoris laid a hand that felt strong and steady on his arm.

"Don't bite me! But I agree with them about Averil Mulholland."

Dale looked astonished.

"You—agree?"

"Yes. Averil's a dear friend of mine. She's a splendid woman, and she's a very fine actress. But she does lack something, and it's something that I think every really great actress must have. Sarah had it. Duse had it. Bartet had it. Ada Rehan had it. And no doubt in former times Rachel and all the great ones. There is something sexless about Averil. She's too austere. Brain preponderates too much in her. She may convince a man, but she doesn't entice him. And I've noticed that the women who rave about her are the intellectual women, not those who are run after by men. I quite understand what you feel about the managers, but probably they have some understanding of their job."

"You make me feel very young and absurd!"

"Not absurd! You are young."

"I'm thirty."

"You haven't emerged from the age of protest. When you're over forty——"

She smiled faintly.

"I'm afraid one gives in to the world after forty," she said.

After a pause, she added:

"What do you want me to do?"

"You know, or know about, everybody. Won't you help me to find her?"

Mrs. Sartoris seemed to consider. She sat very still, looking straight before her.

"Is it essential to have someone with a big name?" she asked at last.

"I don't know. I don't know what these brutes consider essential in their awful trade. But if I can find the really right woman I'll get my way with them somehow."

"There's a girl—she's not known yet; she's only just got into London. She's acting in a failure at the Crown Theatre. The play comes off next Saturday. She's got rather a badly drawn part. But I think she's wonderful in it. The play's from the Hungarian. 'The Leper's Wife.' Not a very attractive name, is it?"

"I read a few denunciations of that in the papers."

"Yes. The *Morning Sun* called it leprosy in *excelsis*."

"What is her name?"

"Valentine Morris."

"I remember. I saw something about her. The critics said she was odd."

"That's better than being ordinary. In art there is absolutely no salvation for the ordinary."

"How is it you're so un-English?"

"I often wonder. Will you come with me to-night to see leprosy in *excelsis*?"

"Will I?"

He got up.

"You're a precious friend. Your mind's got an open door. Dine with me beforehand."

"Yes. You know how greedy I am."

"Is it a virtue not to care whether things are properly cooked?"

"If it is, I'm the last of sinners. Where?"

"The Berkeley? What time does the play begin?"

"Half-past eight."

"Seven fifteen too early for you?"

"No."

"Then, a quarter past seven."

He gripped her hand rather violently.

"You're excited," she said.

Dale looked rather irritated.

"What a fool I am to show things as I do!" he exclaimed.

"A man should see other men in the nude and always wear clothes and a mask himself. Yes, of course I'm excited. And I shall go on being perpetually excited till the first night is over. I don't really mind *your* knowing. But the others!"

His pale face looked severe.

"Some day I shouldn't be at all surprised if you become a cynic. Under your sentiment and your—what shall I say?—your reaching out——"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind. Under it you've got, I believe, an incurably satirical mind."

"Good Lord! Am I a satirical sentimentalist?"

She smiled.

"Keep hold of your sentiment as long as you can. Life's so dry without sentiment."

"I think I've got too much."

When Martin Dale left her, Mrs. Sartoris thought about him, as she often thought about her friends, with a warm mind.

Dale was sincere. And that pleased her. For she knew how difficult it is for most people not to be humbugs in a small way. The large, the expensive, the portentous humbug may have a certain majesty, and almost invariably fascinates the crowd. But the small, the niggling humbug—he gives rather poor sport to the observer of human life. So far Dale wasn't a humbug, either on the large or the small scale. And as yet he wasn't "a professional writer." Mrs. Sartoris wasn't drawn towards those who made what she called a "trade of writing," who had "publicity agents," and cried their wares stridently in the market place. Dale had a profession. He was a barrister. And he had been in several cases, had really worked in the Law, young though he still was. He hadn't merely eaten his dinners, and then subsided into "literature." Until now his writing ventures had been few. He had managed to get two plays produced. But he had never attempted to add to the seething spate of popular fiction.

Each of his plays had had some success. One—very “modern,” the critics had called it—had run for three months at the tiny Bricabrac Theatre. The other had been produced with more pomp at the Duke’s Theatre with its larger stage and gaping auditorium. It had run for two months, and had then been killed by what the Englishman calls a “heat wave,” that is by a spell of fairly fine and warm weather. The nation had found this “suffocating,” and it had certainly slain several plays, Dale’s among them.

Now a really big attempt of his had been accepted for the autumn season at the great Central Theatre, one of the glories of London. A difficult theatre to fill on account of its size. When it was full at every performance the management could count on taking close on four thousand pounds a week, without reckoning in the profits made by the bars. But they had to scour the world to find suitable pieces. Dale was in luck. Nevertheless, as she dressed for dinner that evening, Mrs. Sartoris quite understood his agony. Despite his satirical side, his ruthlessly observant mind and his secret determination, he was naturally a sensitive being. She really liked him, and she wanted to help him. As she got into her car to drive to the Berkeley she said to herself:

“How will it be? Is Valentine Morris the woman for his play? If she is, will she ‘make’ him? And will he ‘make’ her? Am I destined this time to be the Pathfinder for him?”

She hoped so with all her heart.

CHAPTER III

THE little world behind the scenes at the Crown Theatre in Kent Square on that Thursday evening, was permeated with the mist-like depression that emerges from failure. Stockley, the stage-doorkeeper, a round, red man, with watery eyes and a heavy impassive expression, looked grim in his hutch as he waited for the arrival of the members of the company engaged for “The Leper’s Wife.” At the end of the week the theatre was going to be closed, the management having no stop-gap to put on in the place of the

Hungarian drama which the critics had fallen foul of and the public had declined to support.

Maybury, the commissioner, who was on duty in front of the house, looked round for a minute to have a word with Cerberus before taking up his duties. An old soldier, he sported several medals on his chest, and was a well-set-up fellow, who never hesitated to speak his mind freely.

"Evening, Stockley!" he said, in his heavy bass.

"Evenin'!" said Stockley.

"And so the shutters go up Saturday night!"

"Seems so."

"It's all these damned critics."

"That's it! A set of fools who dunno what's good when they see it."

"Why let 'em in? That's what I say. Why give 'em seats? All they do is to go home and crab the play. What do they like? Tell me that!"

"Like? Girls! That's what they like. Legs! That's what gets 'em. A lousy lot o'—Evenin', Mr. James! No, nothin' for you to-night. A lousy—what sort of 'ouse? I couldn't say, Mr. James. But there's only one old lady for the pit so far, and they say *she's* made a mistake. Come with a camp stool and a bag o' buns at three-thirty, evid'n'tly thinkin' it was a fust night. Oh yuss! She's still 'ere. Two for you, Mr. Foster. Them critics 'ave killed it. Don't like leprosy, don't they? Well, Corporal Maybury 'ere says, wot *do* they like? If you give 'em laughs they cry out for drama, and if you give 'em drama, it's the public wants to be amused! I'm fair sick of 'em, and so's Corporal Maybury."

"What I say, sir, is, why let 'em in at all? What *good* do they do yer?"

"It's no use fighting the press, Corporal. I've been on the stage for over thirty years, and you can take it from me that the man who tries to fight the press will end his days in an almshouse. Good evening, Miss Morris."

"Good evening. Thank you, Stockley. Autographs, I suppose. So two people, actually two people out of the eight millions—is it?—of Londoners want my autograph! Darlings! I shall walk through it to-night, Mr. Foster. I haven't the heart to do anything else."

"Now, my dear girl, now!"

He stopped with her outside a door on which was a card with "Miss Morris" printed on it.

"I don't like to hear you say that. If there's only one man in the house, it's our duty to give him his money's worth."

"But if he's got in with an order?"

"We are here to act as well as we know how, whether the house is full or empty."

"But I'm so awfully depressed. For years I've been trying to get into London. And when at last I do—to have only ten days run! I've been crying all the afternoon."

"Nonsense!"

"But I *have*. Tears the size of young footballs. It's too much. I'm twenty-six, almost an old woman!"

"My dear, I'm fifty-six!"

"Yes. But you've been in London in good parts ever since I was born. No, I can't try any more. I'll go on and get through the part. But don't expect me to act."

Foster laid a lean hand on her wrist.

"I'm ashamed of you."

"Why?"

"Where's your pluck? Where's your pride in your art? Where's your self-respect?"

"Why should I respect myself? You don't know me."

"I know you're a damned good actress"

"Do you really think so?"

"No! Of course I'm telling you lies."

"Now don't get angry. I can't stand much more to-day. I really am nearly finished."

"I'm going."

His lanky body moved to go down the narrow passage, then abruptly stopped. His lean, peaked face turned towards her again.

"Remember this, girl!" he said, fixing his small light eyes upon her. "When the curtain goes up you never know who may be in the house. Suppose there are only two men in the stalls. One of them may be the biggest theatre owner in America. Or hidden in a box apparently empty may be a great playwright on the chase for a new star. You've all your way to make. If, when you *can* act, you act badly—ever, you're as big a fool as ever stepped on a stage, and don't deserve any luck at all. Hulloh, Mollat! This girl here says she's going to walk through her part to-night because there's an empty house."

"Walk! I'll keep her on the run. Don't you fear!" growled the half-Polish, half-American actor who was playing

the leading man's part. "If we have got to sink, we will go down with flags flying and the band playing for all it is worth."

He opened wide his lion-like eyes.

"Don't dare to let me down—you!" he said, heavily. "I feel great to-night."

Valentine Morris felt a thrill go through her thin body.

"You're both slave-drivers. But I will try," she said, and she turned into the room with her name on the door.

It was a small sitting-room, and it opened into a small dressing-room. It wasn't luxurious, but she looked at it as she went in with a sort of sad eagerness. Only such a few days ago she had taken possession of this room with so much of hope, so much of exultation. The room of the leading woman in a London theatre! At last she had arrived! At last she was playing "lead" in London! What a lovely little room! And no one to share it with her. And she had put about her "things": the photograph of Father Bexland, the priest, who had been so kind and sympathetic to her when she had acted in Birmingham in "The Marplot," photographs of her mother, and of Brian, her little illegitimate son, of whose existence she was determined she would never be ashamed, whom she would always bravely acknowledge before the world; the little copy in bronze of the Serbian sculptor's bust of Victor Debran, the novelist, which Debran had given her two years ago with the remark: "I believe in you"; two or three absurd mascots, sent to her by dear, but quite unimportant, friends to bring her luck in London.

Mascots! She looked at them now with reproachful eyes, trying to sneer at her own superstitions. But she knew that she was still superstitious somewhere in the depths of her.

Mrs. Blount, her dresser, a fat woman with grey hair done over a huge artificial "bun" made of some mysterious material, greeted her with a "Good-evening, madam. It's time you begun to get dressed." And Valentine tried to put away her deep and tragic depression of spirit as she made ready to transform herself into the leper's wife. Only two more days in these little rooms of a star with the hum of Kent Square outside! Only two more days as a leading actress in London! And then—? The provinces once more, she supposed. Or should she give the whole thing up, give up the stage altogether, take to something else? She was not, perhaps, wholeheartedly theatrical. She knew very well

that there were other things in the world beside the stage. She was not of those women who live wholly for the theatre, who can talk only of plays, of parts, of triumphs past or to come. There was another strain in her, she believed, quite different from the actress-strain, even opposed to the actress-strain. And to-night, feeling the peculiar nervous exhaustion of failure, she had for the moment a desire to turn away from the stage. For a moment she confounded herself with the play, taking its complete fiasco as hers. She hadn't been able to save it; therefore she wasn't worth her salt as an actress. Sarah would have saved it. Duse would have saved it. Women as great as they were would have been able to do something marvellous which would have compelled the public to come to the theatre. But she had let the play go down, and had gone down with it.

What could she have done to save it which she had not done?

She began to puzzle over this as Mrs. Blount helped her to dress. Perhaps if she had taken the part more theatrically, had underlined, emphasised things more, the play would have gone home. But she had an instinctive dislike of all that was what she thought of as melodramatic, as "stagey." Or perhaps if she had acted more naturally, had simplified everything, clarified everything, had played her part more in the nude, as it were, the play would have gained in value. Her taste was for the completely natural method of acting. But somehow the part had, perhaps, got the better of her. It wasn't a purely theatrical part, and yet it wasn't absolutely close to nature. There was something wrong with it, and she hadn't succeeded in completely hiding that something. Duse would surely have hidden it by some exhibition of pure and exquisite art.

Valentine sat deeply considering the whole problem of the part and her playing of it.

But suddenly something in the dressing-room which she hadn't noticed before dawned on her sight in the mirror before which she was sitting: a bunch of roses in a corner standing in a large cheap vase.

"Where did those flowers come from, Mrs. Blount?" she asked. "I didn't notice them when I came in."

"What, them roses, madam? They was left for you at the stage door this evening."

"Who left them?"

"A lady, so they told me. There's a card with them in an envelope. At least, it feels like a card."

"Will you just bring it to me, please."

Mrs. Blount walked on flat feet to the corner, and came back with a small oblong envelope on which was written in a very clear handwriting: "For Miss Valentine Morris."

"This is it, madam."

"Thank you."

Valentine opened the envelope and drew out a card on which was printed: *Miss Caroline Geean, Vernon House, St. James's, The White House, Lamley Common, nr. Farnham, Surrey.*

The two addresses were printed at the corners of the card. Above them and round about the name was written:

"Some roses from my garden. You've got a bad part, but you play it wonderfully. I shall be here again to-night with a friend in Box A. Greetings and good wishes.—C. G."

"A bad part!" murmured Valentine to herself.

She shook her head, which was covered with dark brown silky hair.

"If I'd acted it properly she'd have thought it a good part."

Then followed instantly the thought:

"To-night I'll make her think she made a mistake. I'll *make* her."

When Mrs. Blount had finished with her, Valentine went to look at the roses. There were only a few, loose with their leaves, and long, very long stalks. Few but very fine pink roses deepening almost to orange colour. Wonderful roses from a garden that must surely be wonderful.

They encouraged her. The depression, the sense of nervous exhaustion and futility left her entirely.

"Foster was right, and Mollat was right. I was a miserable worm. But I've had my lesson. These roses have taught me, too."

Life pours forth lessons as a rose bush pours forth roses.

"How many more for me?" thought Valentine.

And her eyes went from Miss Geean's roses to tiny Brian in his white shorts. Brian, too, had been a lesson. And Father Bexland—she had learned something from him. She remembered at this moment some words he had said to her in Birmingham.

"If you hadn't been an actress, my child, you might very

well have been a nun. Don't laugh. I am saying just what I really mean. Some people are single-minded, single-hearted. You aren't. You have two strains in you. They are very marked, and the one is in opposition to the other. Hence a good deal of suffering. And there will be more."

She had decided that suffering was necessary to the artist. And she had resolved to use her suffering in the service of her art. The everlastingly contented and happy—what are they worth? What do they know?

She put the last touches to her make-up. Then she stood up and confronted herself in the mirror, which was strongly lit up.

Valentine Morris made up for the stage with a scrupulous care for under doing it. The preposterously heavy make-up indulged in by many actresses revolted her. The French she considered the worst culprits in this respect, but the English were bad enough. Her aim invariably was to look from the front as if she had on no make-up at all. She saw now in the mirror a rather tall woman—she always thought that she was unfortunately tall for the stage—with great quantities of hair, a low, pure forehead, and large hazel-nut brown eyes. These eyes at this moment looked searching and severe. The face was oval, rather broad at the cheek bones. There was still a strong and definite expression of youth in it. Nevertheless, it classed with the haggard type of face fairly often seen among the beautiful women of London. It had never been plump. It had never looked peach-like. But it had never looked inexpressive. It was a face that seemed always to mean a good deal, and sometimes a great deal. The figure was delicately fine, but slightly angular. Valentine had what painters call a wonderful "line." Her legs were very long, and they were beautiful in their lack of flesh. She had amazingly slim ankles. But they were strong, like steel. She had the hands that ought to go with a body and legs such as hers, thin, long and beautiful, but with a gripping rather than a lazy beauty. Her lips were not very full. Her teeth were small and perfectly even. Her ears were small, and set very flat against her head. She had a firm chin. Some might have thought it obstinate. The eyes looked as if they knew a great deal. They were not at all ignorant eyes.

"Curtain's up!" called a voice.

She turned from the mirror, and, passing through the sitting-room, and opening the outer door quickly, went out

into the passage. Mollat was there just coming away from his room.

"Don't you dare to let me down to-night, minx," he said, in his deep voice. "The house is three-quarters empty, they say. But I'm in the mood to do great things to-night."

He moved a big arm.

"My body wants to let go. Do you know what I mean by that?"

"Yes. But, Mr. Mollat——"

She laid a hand on his arm as they went together towards the staircase and the stage.

"I'm going to play my part quite differently to-night."

"Differently?"

"Don't be afraid. Of course I'll keep the positions we arranged at rehearsal. But I'm not satisfied with what I've been doing. I want to be much more simple and natural. I'm going to let certain obvious effects go, and try for something just dreadfully human. My part is patchy, good and bad. I want to hide all the patchiness to-night."

The big man put an arm round her shoulders.

"I'll help you in your hiding!" he boomed, in the big voice that had something animal in it.

They drew close to the stage, and could hear the voices of the actors performing on it.

CHAPTER IV

"**I**T was an empty house, wasn't it, madam?" said Mrs. Blount at eleven-fifteen that night, as Valentine came into her room after curtain fall.

"I suppose it was."

"Why, madam, I heard there were only twenty in the dress circle!"

"I daresay. Of course the play's a complete frost. But I acted much better to-night. Something—those roses perhaps—helped me to act. And d'you know, Mrs. Blount, it seemed to me as if the theatre were full."

"Well I never, madam! How could that be when——"

There came a tap at the door. Valentine turned quickly.

"It's Caroline Geean!" was the thought in her mind.

"Just see what it is, Mrs. Blount, will you," she said.

Mrs. Blount went to the door, which was partially concealed by a pseudo-Japanese screen, and Valentine moved a little further up the room, and seemed to be doing something at a small table where she sometimes sat to write notes between her scenes on the stage. From there she heard a brief murmur of voices. Then Mrs. Blount came round the screen with a card.

"There's a gentleman wants to see you, madam."

"A gentleman!" said Valentine, in a voice that showed disappointment.

She had been so sure that it was Miss Geean, the giver of the roses that had helped her to act that night.

She took the card and read the name on it, Martin Dale. On the card was pencilled, "Can I see you for a moment? I have an urgent reason."

As she held the card and read what was on it, printed and written, Valentine knew that abruptly and unexpectedly she had reached a crisis in her life. This was the man who had recently had a big drama accepted for production at the Central Theatre. He must have seen her performance that evening. He had an urgent reason for wishing to make her acquaintance. She remembered Foster's remark, "When the curtain goes up you never know who may be in the house." And something within her trembled and something within her exulted.

"Please have this gentleman told that I will see him with pleasure," she said, schooling her voice to an unmeaning tranquillity.

Mrs. Blount went to the door and repeated the message to the man who was there, sent by Stockley.

"You needn't stay, Mrs. Blount, thanks."

Mrs. Blount retreated to the dressing-room with an air of discretion.

"Oh, I say, just bring me the roses, will you?" Valentine called.

"Yes, madam."

Valentine took the vase from Mrs. Blount's puffy hands and put it by Brian's photograph.

Another knock.

"Come in!"

And then, surprised, she saw a grey-haired woman with steady turquoise blue eyes coming in, followed by a short, broad young man, with a fine head, a deathly pale face and burning dark eyes which he immediately fixed upon her with ruthless intentness.

"You weren't expecting a woman as well, Miss Morris," said the grey-haired woman, holding out a hand cordially. "But women are in everything nowadays, aren't they? And it was I who brought Mr. Dale to see you to-night. I was here last Monday, and you have drawn me here again. Can you put up with me for a few minutes? My name is Sartoris, Mrs. Sartoris. And of course this is Mr. Dale."

"I'm very glad to see you both. Do please sit down. Won't you sit here, Mrs. Sartoris? We've got a terrible frost, haven't we? Nobody wants to come near us."

"That's not quite true. What lovely roses!"

"They were sent to me by a Miss Caroline Geean."

"Oh. I saw her in a box to-night."

"Which was she?"

"The woman with the very pale yellow hair in a white dress with a double row of pearls. She was with a dark girl in red."

"I didn't know which of the two was Miss Geean."

"She's an American. I only know her by sight. She lives over here. But I'm being too voluble. Why have women such an awful and constant flow of words? Mr. Dale wants to talk to you. May I look at that bust over there?"

"Of course. It's a copy of——"

"I know. Something by that Serbian man. A peasant with genius."

She got up and crossed the room.

"What a dear little boy!" she said, bending.

"That's my son," Valentine said.

"Lucky you!"

Valentine Morris, she scarcely knew why, looked at Dale. Their eyes met, and suddenly she felt an odd sensation. It was, she thought, like nakedness of the mind. And 'e was surely inspecting her mind.

"Miss Morris," he began, "let me tell you at once why I am here to-night."

"Yes, please do," she said, trying for complete unconcern.

"I'm looking for an actress to play the leading part in

a piece at the Central Theatre. Perhaps you've heard that I've written a play which will open the autumn season there?"

"Yes, I have. I saw an announcement last Thursday in the *Daily Telegraph*, too."

"I'm told you finish here on Saturday."

"We do. The play's a complete failure."

"That's obvious. But you aren't a failure."

"I haven't been able to save the play."

"You made a very fine effort to-night, anyhow."

"I did my best, but——"

"May I ask what you mean to do when the run here is over?"

"I have nothing in prospect," she said, with simplicity.

A look of relief came into his pale face.

"I must first tell you how things are with me," he said, leaning forward. "The management of the Central Theatre wanted to foist a very popular actress on me for the principal rôle. Luckily I have it in my contract that I can refuse anyone whom I consider unsuitable to act in my play. I refused to have this actress. The management told me to-day that I must find someone fitted to play the lead before next Monday when we start rehearsals. Of course she has to be approved by them. Mrs. Sartoris, whom I consulted in my difficulty, suggested that you might do for the part."

Mrs. Sartoris turned round.

"So we came here to-night," she said.

"And I want you for my play," said Dale, firmly.

He looked hard at Valentine. She didn't speak and he went on:

"I must have you for it. You are just the woman I need. The managers mayn't see eye to eye with me. It's quite possible they won't. But if you are ready for a big try I'll do my best to carry the thing through somehow. Now for it. Will you come to see the managers, Mr. Champion and Mr. Leslie Grant, to-morrow morning—say at twelve o'clock? I'll make the appointment. At the theatre, of course."

"I'll come," said Valentine.

She spoke in a quiet voice. She didn't look excited. But she was burning. There was a moment of silence. Then Mrs. Sartoris said:

"D'you know, Miss Morris, that you gave me a fright this evening?"

"Did I? How? Oh, I believe I know. You mean because I had changed my way of playing my part?"

"Yes. Why did you do it?"

"I wasn't satisfied. I felt I must make the whole thing either more theatrical—brilliant, you know, in a stagey way—or else more natural, more simple, in fact purely human. I chose the second method."

"If you hadn't," said Dale, with an abruptness almost uncouth, "I'm quite certain I shouldn't have come round to-night to ask you to act for me."

"Then perhaps I was prompted for once by my good angel," said Valentine. "I'm not generally lucky."

Dale was staring at her, and now he said:

"No, I don't suppose you are."

Mrs. Sartoris glanced at him and for an instant looked slightly embarrassed, a very rare occurrence, for she was usually a complete mistress of social self-possession.

"I had to get accustomed to your new reading of your part, Miss Morris," she then said, rather hastily, as if to cover up something. "I had to change my point of view. I missed two or three very clever effects, high lights, that I had been hoping to see again. But you were right. You humanised the part. You made it harmonious. You showed that you have what I'm afraid most of our actresses are without, an intellect allied to a temperament. For it isn't an austere intellect."

As she said these last words she looked at Dale and he thought of Averil Mulholland. This woman, still almost a girl, unknown though she was, meant more to him than Miss Mulholland meant with all her fame. She had the something which gets at a man, not merely at his intellect, if he happens to be blest with one, but at the whole man. That infernal little Meyer was dreadfully human, and perhaps even dreadfully typical. Dale knew it at this moment. He knew it, but he resented it. And he got up looking stern.

"Well, Miss Morris, we mustn't keep you," he said. "It's very good of you to have seen us. To-morrow at the Central Theatre, punctually at twelve."

"I'll be there."

"They may be nasty."

"He represents managers as monsters of indiscretion and heartless iniquity," said Mrs. Sartoris.

Valentine turned and said to her with a sort of suddenly hard seriousness:

"I'm sure you have never had to fight, either for a livelihood, a position, or even an ambition."

"You are quite right. I haven't. I've never been poor. My little position—if it can be called so—is quite secure. And I'm afraid I've never been scourged to action by the bloody taskmaster you mentioned last."

"Then I'm sure you don't know how coarse human beings can be, and generally are, when a fight is on. But"—she looked again at Dale—"don't be afraid. I can bear a lot. I can even sometimes give quite as good as I get."

And then there was another knock at the door. And this time it was Miss Caroline Geean, the giver of the roses.

CHAPTER V

ON the following day, when Valentine was dressing in Tatford's Hotel, near the British Museum, to go to the Central Theatre, she marvelled at the abrupt turn an unseen hand had given to the wheel of her fate. Only yesterday Life had seemed to be dying away from her, receding like an outgoing tide. And now she was conscious of the flow and the energy and the wonder of it as she had never been conscious before. Of course the two managers, Champion and Grant, might "turn her down." They would almost certainly "put her through it" in a way that would be very unpleasant. But a chance was being offered to her at last, and, perhaps without any very cogent reason, she felt full of hope.

As she got into an omnibus to go to the theatre she switched off from herself to the American woman who had followed Mrs. Sartoris and Dale into her room on the preceding night. She had received a strong impression from her. Yet she was puzzled by her. Was Miss Geean thirty-two or perhaps thirty-five? Or was she much older—forty—forty-five? Was she highly intelligent, or was she a woman of ordinary intelligence? (She wasn't stupid. That was

certain.) Was she highly cultivated or had she only the usual something that often passes for cultivation in a woman of the world? What sort of nature and temperament had she? What were her interests? What sort of a past had she had?

Her low voice, her exceptionally quiet manner, her curious soft self-possession, her large non-committal grey eyes, her small, white, yielding hands—these gave away no secrets of an enigma. Was she always carefully on guard? Or was she unusually natural? A finished piece of artifice, or just herself, a peculiar, unusual self?

Miss Geean had been very friendly in her deliberate, soft, cushiony way, had spoken warmly of Valentine's acting, had even asked Valentine to come down to her house in Surrey to spend the following Sunday. And Valentine, lured by her quiet manner, had told her why Martin Dale had been to the theatre that night and what he had said. Miss Geean had seemed pleased and had said, "Do not miss your chance." And Valentine had felt that what Miss Geean in her own private life intended should happen must surely happen, without struggle, without noise or confusion. She had also felt that Miss Geean must be very rich, must have great possessions. Yet not a word had been said about money or about the things that money can buy. Miss Geean's pearls, of course, were marvellous.

Enigma. The word attached itself inevitably to Miss Geean in Valentine's mind.

As to the dark girl in red who had been with her Valentine thought of her as just a dark girl in red.

Curious the immense importance of personality. Valentine felt herself wondering on the omnibus how much of personality she possessed. Often she had believed that she had a great deal, and had felt that it was a weapon with which she would eventually hew her way to victory. But these optimistic moments were sometimes succeeded by dark intervals, in which she feared that she was not impressive, not really interesting, not one of those women who stand out of the crowd by reason of the strength of their mystery.

She got down from the omnibus and became involved in a maze of market baskets, swearing men with bare arms, lorries, waggons. The rough pavement was greasy with refuse. Her heart began to thump.

"What impression shall I make? Will they turn me down?"

Whether they would be rude to her or not didn't really matter.

She came to the great portico with columns, deep red touched up with gold.

"Where is the stage-door, please?" she asked of a gigantic man in livery, with a face like a harvest moon and a chest that looked to her like the slope of an Alp.

"Round to the right, Mum."

She went round to the right.

"What d'you want?" said a vinous voice, and a pair of keen, summing-up eyes stared at Valentine, through an aperture just inside the stage-door.

"I've come by appointment to meet Mr. Martin Dale and the management. Is Mr. Dale here yet?"

"Yes; just gone in."

"That's my name."

She handed the keen-eyed man a card. He had a red face on which was fixed an apparently permanent ironical expression.

"Here, Harry! Har-ree!"

A pale youth of perhaps sixteen appeared biting his nails.

"Take that up to Mr. Dale. I believe he's in the lacker room with Mr. Leighton Cole."

The youth stared in a cattle market sort of way at Valentine, carrying his glance down from her face to her feet, and went away with her card.

"Is Mr. Leighton Cole in the new piece?" asked Valentine.

"Yes. He plays the lead. Know him?"

"No. But of course I've seen him act."

"He's a funny one and no mistake. You never know what he's up to. When he came in to-day what d'you think he says to me?"

"What?"

"My God, Brewster—that's my name—My God, Brewster," he says, 'Why can't we do something to satisfy Ireland? I lie awake at night in my beautiful soft bed,' he says, 'agernising'—that was his very word, if you'll believe me!—'agernising about Ireland.' Think of that for an actor!"

"Perhaps he's Irish."

"Irish! He was born in Bedford Square. His father was a Cockney and his mother's French. Does that make him Irish?"

"Well no, I don't suppose it does."

"Come this way, please," said Harry at this moment, reappearing.

Valentine felt a strong movement of the blood.

"Now for it!"

Somewhere upstairs in the big theatre was a room with red walls called the "Lacquer Room." Standing together on the red carpet that covered its floor Valentine saw a group of four men, as she came in following Harry. Martin Dale was one of them, and directly he saw her he came forward quickly and held out his hand.

"Oh, Miss Morris! You're punctual. That's splendid. Let me—Mr. Champion, this is Miss Morris. Mr. Grant—Mr. Leighton Cole."

"Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Mr. Champion."

"Good-morning."

"Good-morning."

"Good-morning."

Valentine saw three pairs of eyes fixed upon her. Champion's were keen and cold. Leslie Grant's were less cold but intensely observant. As to Mr. Cole's, which were large, bright, and light, mainly yellow, she fancied, they held a problem.

"Could I act with this woman?"

After the formal greetings there was a moment of silence, which seemed to Valentine harsh. Champion was now staring at her figure.

"How tall are you, Miss Morris?" he said, abruptly.

"About five feet six inches, I believe."

"Not more than that?"

He looked at Leighton Cole.

"I don't think so."

"The play you're in's a rank failure, I understand."

"I'm sorry to say it is. It comes off to-morrow."

"You've never been in London before, have you?" asked Leslie Grant.

"Not in a speaking part. This is my first real engagement in the West End."

"Hoom!" said Grant, in a sort of grunt.

And again there was a harsh silence.

Valentine felt condemned. She also felt, ridiculously, as if shame attached to her.

"I've played a good many leading parts in the provinces," she said.

"Oh—the provinces!" said Champion, pushing out a lascivious underlip.

"It's so difficult—it takes time to get into London."

"Well, Cole, d'you think it's worth while to see what she can do?"

In reply the actor took hold of Champion's left arm and they moved away together over the red carpet, the tall willowy actor leaning and speaking in a soft, purring voice into the potentate's ear.

"Miss Morris isn't too tall for Mr. Cole," said Dale, in a rather fierce voice.

"Think not?" said Grant.

"Of course not. Why, Mr. Cole's close on six foot."

"I think he'd prefer a shorter woman," said Grant, looking critically at Valentine's long legs. "A shorter woman would make a better contrast."

"But the acting's the point."

"My dear chap, we have to think of everything."

"I sometimes wonder," said Dale, with scarcely concealed exasperation, "how you ever get a cast together at all."

"The responsibility isn't yours."

"But it's my play."

"Exactly. And our risk."

Dale felt hot all over. His eyes met Valentine's, and at that exact moment a strong feeling of mutual friendship drew them together.

The two men returned slowly over the red carpet. The actor was still leaning and talking into the manager's ear. As they came up to the others Leighton Cole stopped speaking and Champion said to Grant:

"I think we'd better hear her speak. Have you got the script with you, Mr. Dale?"

"Yes," said Dale, pulling some typed manuscript out of his jacket pocket.

"Give it here, will you!"

Dale gave it, and Champion slowly turned over the pages.

"This scene will do. Mr. Dale, I suppose you can take the part of Halliday?"

Dale looked startled and uncomfortable for an instant. Then with a sudden defiant look he said:

"I'll have a try. I'm no actor but I'll gladly do my best."

"But we can't both read from the same script," said Valentine.

A new sound in her voice seemed to focus the attention of the four men on her.

"Well, if that's so," said Grant, "we can get another copy from the office."

"I shall be very much obliged if you would," said Valentine.

"Meyer! Meyer!" called Grant, raising his thick voice in a shout.

"Mr. Grant?" cried the young Jew, hurrying in.

"Get the script of Mr. Dale's play that's in the top drawer of my desk, will you."

"Certainly, Mr. Grant."

"And bring some whiskies and sodas."

"Yes, Mr. Grant."

"Perhaps I could have a *Crème de Menthe*?" said Leighton Cole, in a voice that sounded sweetly satirical.

"A *Crème de Menthe* for Mr. Cole! Meyer! Meyer! A *Crème de Menthe* for Mr. Cole!"

"A what—Mr. Grant? Excuse me!"

"Mr. Cole wants a *Crème de Menthe*."

"I'll bring it, Mr. Cole, certainly."

"What a useful little Israelite it is. Worth its weight in liqueurs undoubtedly. *How* I wish I were a Jew! May I sit down? All the hovering—" he waved a white hand airily, and lifted his left shoulder,—"in the midst of a sea, an ocean, yes, an ocean, an Atlantic really, of Turkey red——"

"I say! I say!" protested Champion. "This isn't Turkey red. This is lacquer red."

"I see it as Turkey red. It reminds me of Twill," murmured Cole, speaking through his teeth, and lifting a corner of his upper lip to show a gleam of gold.

"My dear Leighton," said Grant, "you must be colour-blind. This is the most glorious shade of—oh, here's the script! Here, Miss Morris! Just stand away, will you, and hand it out to us. Ladle it out. This is a damned big theatre. None of your natural, hole and corner methods are any good here. Let it rip!"

"I'll do my best. Of course I know nothing whatever about the play."

"That doesn't matter. Mr. Dale will show you. Show her, Mr. Dale, will you? Oh, here are the drinks. That's good!"

He lit a large cigar.

"Not too much soda, Meyer."

"No, Mr. Grant."

Grant sat down in an armchair and stuck out a pair of fat, rounded legs.

"Get on with it, will you. I've got to be at Ciro's before one."

"How I wish I were a Jew!" murmured Cole, sipping his *Crème de Menthe* and blinking slowly.

"Isn't this awful?" Dale whispered to Valentine Morris.

"No; just ordinary theatre! What page is it?"

"Page——"

"Get on, please, Mr. Dale!"

"One minute, Mr. Champion. We must find the . . . Page ten, Act II. You start—top of the page."

"What's it all about?"

"I say, please get ahead, Miss Morris. We can't stay here all day. Lez, what about Dan Shinkmann? Is he coming to Ciro's? Get on with it, Mr. Dale. We're listening. What does he say about Ida Reitzenstein? She's opening her mouth too damned wide. Success in Vienna doesn't amount to a row of pins over here."

"I think we could get her for a hundred and fifty."

"That's too much. If she'd ever been in America . . . We're listening all right, Mr. Dale. We hear you. Go ahead. Keep right along. If she'd been in America she might be worth it. But who cares about Vienna over here? Why, three-quarters of our audiences scarcely know what it's the capital of since the war. A hundred ought to be our limit."

"Just what I think. Suppose we offer her—don't stop, Mr. Dale. We can hear you."

"But really——"

"We can hear you. I told Shinkmann when I saw him at the R.A.C. last Wednesday that it was no damned use Reitzenstein thinking she was going to bleed us white over here. I said to him—what's that, Mr. Dale?"

"I'm awfully sorry, but hadn't we better wait till you've——"

"Wait? We're due at Ciro's before one. Speak up, will you, Miss Morris. We want to hear how much voice you have. Lez, I think the best thing would be to make Shinkmann think we aren't really keen on the Reitzenstein. Put it over him that we're after somebody else. I happen to know she's promised him fifteen per cent on whatever she gets out of us. Now if he finds—what's that, Cole?"

Think she's any good? Think she's worth a try at rehearsal?"

"She's on the tall side. But she's not tall enough to dwarf *me*."

"Think there's anything in her? Keep on, Miss Morris. Ladle it out! D'you feel her sex? Oh? You do! Yes, good-looking in a way, but no earthly good for the picture post-cards. What age d'you think she'd look with the curtain up?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five! I should give her over thirty. What d'you say her age is, Lez?"

"I'll ask her."

"What's the good of that? She won't tell the truth."

"She might. There's something damned odd about her."

"She's not so damned odd as all that."

"She's got the follow-the-gleam look in her eyes," said Leighton Cole.

"What's that you say? Follow the what?"

"Something *you*'ve never heard of or imagined, my dear Champion. Her chin and forehead are almost Pre-Raphaelite."

"What's that? Pre-war?"

"Oh, yes, decidedly so!"

Grant raised his voice.

"One minute, please, Miss Morris."

"Yes, Mr. Grant."

"How old are you?"

"Just twenty-six."

"Thirty-six?"

"*Twenty-six*, Mr. Grant."

"Oh. Thank you. Think people'd admire her, Cole? Think men'd want her? She's got damned long legs."

"She has very beautiful legs."

"Think so? Well, I don't know. I'm not so gone on the greyhound type as all that."

"Look here Lez, I think the best way with Dan Shinkmann would be to——"

"Mr. Champion!"

"—let him think we don't care a damn whether we——"

"Mr. Champion!"

"What's that? Go on, Miss Morris. We're listening."

"But you are not listening. And even if you were it is utterly impossible for us to do ourselves or the scene justice with people talking incessantly close to us."

Leighton Cole showed his gold tooth in a delighted smile.

Champion stared, like a man who has heard something which he can't believe in. Leslie Grant moved his nose from side to side as if he were suffering from hay fever. And Dale, standing by Miss Morris with the script in his hand, gazed at her with a startled admiration which he didn't attempt to conceal.

"Whether I could be of any value to you, I don't know," Valentine continued, as no one else spoke. "And you don't know either. And you never will know unless you give me a chance of at least indicating to you what I can do. There are only two and a half pages more to this scene. I ask you to give me a chance by not talking while I read my part of them. But if you must talk I'd rather stop. I've been in the provinces for years. I want badly to stay in London. But I'd rather go back to the provinces than struggle in vain against Mr. Daniel Shinkmann, whoever he may be."

All this was said by Miss Morris with complete self-possession and in an agreeable but very firm mezzo-soprano voice.

Again there was a dead silence, which seemed to Dale to last for a very long time. It was at length broken by Miss Morris, who said:

"Will you please give me the cue, Mr. Dale?"

Dale started and gave it. She took it up, and then, between them, they finished the scene without further interruption.

Champion got up. He looked very grim, even brutal, and his large clean-shaven face was slightly flushed. He glanced at his watch.

"Time we went to *Ciro's, Lez*," he said.

"Yes; we'd better be off. Thank you, Miss Morris. That will do."

Grant gave a jerk of the head in her direction, and walked slowly away with Champion. Valentine Morris mechanically folded together her copy of the script, looking straight before her at the red carpet.

"Tell me, Miss Morris!" murmured a honey-sweet voice in her ear.

She started and looked up.

"Yes, Mr. Cole?"

"Would you call this"—a wave of the hand—"lacquer red?"

"I really don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Well, I see it as Turkey red. But they say I'm colour-blind. D'you know that you're very clever?"

"Am I?"

"Yes, very. And you have an artist's sense of the irrelevant. I was getting very tired of Mr. Daniel Shinkmann, too. You were quite right. It was time we had a rest from him. He was monopolising the conversation! And I'm perfectly certain he's a Zionist. I think they'll engage you."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because you've got unbounded cheek, though you may not know it. And in our profession one may do without intelligence, one may do without imagination, one may do without looks, one may even do without technique, but one can't do without cheek. God bless you."

He drifted away vaguely, looking at nothing with his large yellow eyes and holding one shoulder much higher than the other.

CHAPTER VI

"D'YOU know that you gave me the shock of my life this morning?" said Dale to Valentine Morris a little later in the Carlton Grill Room.

"Because I went for those two manager-beasts?"

"Yes."

"I told you last night that sometimes I gave as good as I got."

"You certainly do. I wish I could take a strong line with them. I could if I were a success. But somehow being an author, if you aren't thoroughly accustomed to it, and if you aren't famous, has a paralysing effect on the *morale*. I find myself being perpetually ashamed of my play like the man who is the father of an awful-looking baby. These theatre fellows have a way of ignoring your opinion which makes you feel in the end as if it were worth absolutely nothing."

"They're coarse and you're not; you're sensitive. Did I sound bad-tempered?"

"No. That's what surprised me."

"I was blazing inside. The artist in me was blazing."

You looked cold, glacial almost. That's what impressed them, I believe."

"I didn't care whether they threw me out or not. Perhaps they will. Mr. Champion was furious. But I don't care. I've a being in me which takes complete charge sometimes. It overcomes *me*. It is a conqueror."

Dale looked at her with deep interest.

"In those moments you're what is called reckless."

"Oh, absolutely. I have to be, and I'm glad of it. If they do give me a try I shall be reckless again at rehearsal. I shall play that part in my own way. I hope it will be your way, too, but if it isn't I shan't be able to help that."

She leaned towards him over the small table.

"I wish you'd explain the part to me fully. I daresay I shall never play it. But anyhow I want to understand it."

When he had told her they had finished lunch. She had listened, never interrupting, eating slowly, evidently absorbed. It was then that he realised her great gift of concentration, the faculty her mind had of closing down, like a steel trap, on a subject it meant to be master of.

"You can listen," he said.

She didn't seem to hear that remark.

"It isn't a straight part," she said.

"No; I suppose not."

"I couldn't play it as a straight part. She's a very complex woman."

"And so are you. I'm sure of that."

Again she did not seem to hear.

"Magdalen Smith!" she said slowly.

"Oh, by the way, they say I must give her another name."

"Why?"

"They say Smith's too common."

"They are fools. If I play it I *will* be called Magdalen Smith."

"They're always telling me they know what the public wants and I don't."

"They know no more than we do. Anyhow, it is the writers, the actress's business to make the public want what *they* want, like what *they* like. Big people impose their natures, their temperaments, on the public. You and I—we don't go into the Central Theatre to be a prey of the herd. When I see the public I always say to myself, 'Here's

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the wax. I am the seal. Now I am going to stamp myself on you.' That's how one must look at the public."

"I believe you're going to succeed," he said. "You are arrogant."

"That sounds rather horrid. And what are you?"

"I think perhaps I could be if I had a big success. Here we sit, you and I. Nobody knows of us. We aren't celebrated. The big world doesn't bother about us. We haven't got 'names.' But suppose the iron of celebrity had entered into our souls. Wouldn't it stiffen them? Shouldn't we be ready to trample, to impose our wills, to rule? I can see you——"

He stopped.

"Go on! Go on!" she said. "It needn't be complimentary. Say what you like."

"I can see you as a star bringing the whole personnel of a great theatre to their knees."

She laughed a long, low laugh.

"And I can see you as a tremendously successful playwright behaving worse than Napoleon ever did in his conquering campaigns. You could be a tyrant."

"But not with you."

And then the waiter came up, and Dale paid the bill, and Valentine Morris and he went out into the September sunshine.

"Where can I take you?" he asked.

"Nowhere. I'm going to get on a bus and go into the unfashionable quarters of this great city. When shall we know?"

"What the tin gods think of you? Almost directly, I suppose. I am going back now to find out."

"D'you think they've decided?"

"Probably."

"And what d'you expect?"

She was looking earnestly at him, and in her eyes he saw a personality that seemed to him fierce.

"I don't know. With theatre people one never knows. I often think they're a humanity apart, like a special breed of animals. They may have their own code. But really I don't know what it is."

"Remember that I'm a theatre person," she said.

"I may realise that later on. Would you come to rehearse on approval?"

"Yes, of course."

"And, if they want you, what would you ask a week?"

"How much money?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'd take practically anything they'd give me. But I'm dreadfully poor."

"Would you take fifty pounds a week? They couldn't offer you less."

"Would I?"

He took her hand and immediately felt it give his a hard squeeze. And he said to himself: "If they want the sexual appeal, this woman's got it."

"I'll come round to the theatre to-night," he said, "and tell you what's happened."

"Yes, do. This is terribly exciting. Last night I felt as flat as a filleted plaice. Now I feel buoyant and almost superb. Somehow I believe they will try me in spite of my insolence. But if they do I won't give in to them. I won't adopt their stupid, commercial ideas. I won't let them strip me of all my originality and make me a vulgar theatrical puppet. I'm going to be myself, not their horrid notion of what a Central Theatre actress should be. There's something vitalising in a big battle. If they try me I shall bring all my aeroplanes and tanks into action . . . there's my bus!"

She left him. He saw her long legs mounting—mounting to the top.

When the omnibus disappeared in the traffic he realised that it had carried away from him one of the strongest personalities he had ever encountered.

"She's got the devil in her!" he said to himself.

When he reached the theatre he said to the doorkeeper:

"Have Mr. Champion and Mr. Grant come back, Brewster?"

"Yes, Mr. Dale. I think they're on the stage."

"Thanks!"

The vast stage, shrouded in dimness, sloping down to the safety curtain, looked dreary, unpromising of pleasure or beauty, as Dale stepped out on it. Its vastness made him feel small, not physically but mentally, small in brain, in talent, in value. There was to him something dreadfully overcoming in the huge size of the theatre. And yet he had deliberately written a play planned for a big stage.

He found the two managers down stage with a dusty, middle-aged man, whose chief asset at first sight seemed to be

an enormous drooping moustache. This was Mr. Hawkins, the famous scene painter.

"Silvery blue," Mr. Hawkins was saying, in a hoarse voice. "That is my idea of it. A faint silvery blue with green marble against it."

"How many steps shall we have?" said Champion.

"Oh, at least a dozen," said Grant, with authority.

He was a great "producer," and had a wonderful power of visualising a scene.

"Good-day, Mr. Dale," said Hawkins, turning. "I was just giving Mr. Champion and Mr. Grant my ideas for the third act. It's like this——"

He explained.

"It sounds very effective," said Dale, who felt he could get on with Hawkins.

"Well, that's about all!" said Champion presently.

"I'll just go to the paint room," said Hawkins. "I must see about the exact green for the marble. It's got to be practically jade green."

"D'you want us, Mr. Dale?" said Grant, as Hawkins shambled away into the dusty twilight.

"Yes. I want to know about Miss Morris."

"What's she want as a salary?" said Champion, curtly.

"Oh, I'm sure she'd take fifty pounds a week."

"I should think she would. Not a soul's ever heard of her."

"Not a soul had ever heard of Sarah Bernhardt once, I suppose."

"She's no Sarah Bernhardt."

"I don't say she is. Will you try her?"

Champion looked at Grant. Dale knew of course that by this time the two managers had definitely decided one way or the other.

"If we do," said Grant. "It must be fully understood she has to rehearse on approval. We couldn't take the risk of putting on an unknown woman whom nobody's ever heard of until we've fully made up our minds that she can carry it through."

"I should say not," muttered Champion roughly.

"Then is she to come to the first rehearsal on Monday?"

"Yes, she can come. But if she isn't satisfactory we shall give her the chuck."

That was the message Dale had to carry in the evening to

Kent Square. He knew by this time the courage of Valentine Morris and so he delivered it verbatim.

"What I'm afraid of is this," he said, after telling her. "That they won't give you a proper chance of showing what you can do. Champion's an impatient chap. I often wonder how he has got where he is. He never seems really to give his whole attention to anything. He's like a fluid. You can't grasp him. He always slips away from you somehow."

"Which has the most power? Has he, or has Mr. Grant?"

"I don't know."

"I think it's Champion."

"Why?"

She moved her shoulders.

"I feel it is. But I much prefer Grant."

"Yes. He's less brutal and has more sense of the artistic. Here's the script of your part."

She took it eagerly.

"I shall read it to-night. But I must have the script of the whole play. Have you got it?"

"Not with me. But you shall have it to-morrow morning."

"All Sunday I shall be studying it, in the country."

"I wish you were going to be in London," he said, apparently rather downcast.

"I shall be in Surrey, at Miss Geean's. I can be quiet there, she says."

"Well, I must be off, and leave you to change."

"Yes. It's nearly twenty to twelve."

She saw his eyes go to the photograph of Brian.

"He's just six," she said.

"Is he?"

"He's with my mother near Margate. He needed sea air. If I weren't going to Miss Geean's I should have seen him on Sunday."

"I hope someday I shall see him."

"If I make a success ever in London I shall take a little house—I hate flats—and have him to live with me. He's got no father."

"Your husband's dead? That cursed war, perhaps?"

"No, I'm not a widow. I've never been married. That's what I mean by Brian having no father. It's a lie in words, and a truth in what I call reality. There's a man still living—but as a father to Brian he doesn't count. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"Of course. I'll come to the matinée."

"Do. And perhaps then, as I'm to be tried, you'll tell me who is in the cast besides Mr. Cole."

"Of course I will."

He pressed her hand. When he was out in the Square he felt oddly excited by his knowledge of the fact that she was an unmarried mother. He wondered what sort of man Brian's father was, how it had all happened. She must have been very young, less than twenty. What a courageous creature she was. Her fearlessness, shown to him now on two occasions, made a tremendous impression on him. Evidently she was afraid of nothing, flinched from nothing.

But in thinking that he was wrong. And that he was wrong she proved to him on the following day.

In fulfilment of his promise he went to the matinée at the Crown Theatre taking with him a typed out list of the entire cast of his play, all the parts in which had been allotted except the part which he hoped would be hers. It was a big play for a big theatre and the cast was a large one.

After the last act "The Leper's Wife," which was played to an audience so small that it was scarcely visible, Dale went "behind," and found Valentine Morris sitting on the sofa in her little sitting-room and taking a cup of tea from a tray held by Mrs. Blount. A second cup was there, and:

"That's for you," said Valentine, "and here are some biscuits and cigarettes. Do sit down. It was difficult to act to-day. There can't have been twenty pounds in the house. Oh, how I long for a crowd, for the Central Theatre full to the walls! An empty theatre is like death. A crammed theatre—oh, it's life to me, fullness of life! Will it be full for your play and shall I be there? To-day I long to look into the future. I would dare it. Thank you for sending me the play."

"Will you dine with me somewhere before the evening performance?"

"No, I can't. I'm not leaving the theatre. I'm going to lie here on the sofa and begin reading your play. I can't wait. If you knew what all this means to me! I'm like one dying of anæmia who has had a transfusion of glorious red youthful blood. You can't understand what I'm feeling. Vitality has been pumped into me. Life is hammering at my door."

She lit a cigarette quickly.

"Have you got the cast with you?"

"Yes."

"Do read it out. I'm longing to—— Just think how wonderful it will be to me to rehearse with big actors, London actors, stars perhaps. Are there any stars?"

"Besides, Leighton Cole? Yes. I must say Champion and Grant are giving me a wonderful cast."

She lay back on the sofa, pushed up some cushions behind her head. The long line of her body stretched out at full length fascinated Dale. He felt more and more the allurements of this woman, whom he had only known for two days. Others must feel it too. Even Champion and Grant, they must surely feel it in spite of doubt and antagonism. And it must "get over" to an audience. Even in the empty Crown Theatre he had felt it strongly, and so had Mrs. Sartoris, and that curious Miss Geean, whom he had seen for a moment as he was going out of the sitting-room after his first interview with Valentine.

He unfolded the paper he had brought with him.

"There are a great many small parts," he said. "D'you want to hear who fills them?"

"Yes, please."

He read out a list of names.

"I know some of them," she commented.

"Do you know any of these people personally?"

"No, not personally. I know swarms of provincial actors and actresses, but very few, pathetically few, London ones."

"Well, now for the stars, the chief part people."

He saw a bright gleam of eagerness in her nut-brown eyes. How vital she was, like something intensely active, quivering with activity, straining in a leash!

"Leighton Cole plays the lead. There's a touch of the grotesque in the part. He's wonderful in the grotesque—no good in a straight part."

"I know. His talent is a talent of insincerity."

"That's it exactly."

"For the two women's parts, which are important but subordinate to yours, we have Irene D'Arblay and Diana Barton."

She opened her eyes more widely.

"To think of my playing lead with them! I'm afraid they'll hate me. They're so celebrated, and nobody's heard of me."

"Fascinate them!"

"Fascinate envious women! But if I have any fascination they'll hate me the more for it."

"Then crush them."

She drew down her level silky brown brows.

"That might be easier. Who else is there?"

"I've kept the most important to the last. Beside Leighton Cole's part there are two really big parts for men. One is a middle-aged man. We've actually persuaded Sir Eden Lisle to return to the stage and play him."

With a brusque movement Valentine sat up on the sofa, pressing it with the palms of her hands.

"Sir Eden Lisle! But how wonderful! He knows more about our stage than any other man alive. But he'll be a terribly severe critic."

"Are you afraid of him?"

After a moment she said:

"No."

"Finally there's a brilliant part for a gay young man of the world, the reckless modern type with charm, no morals, no sense of religion, no idea of duty (except in war), no high ideals, but seduction and self-possession as much as you like. An athlete's body. Soul? Difficult if not impossible to find. Guess whom we've captured for that?"

"But I can't."

"The women's idol. The most attractive lover on our stage to-day. He's just back from America. We engaged him by wireless in mid-ocean."

While he was speaking Dale noticed a curious faint change steal over the woman on the sofa. Her almost gay eagerness seemed to be gradually obscured by a thin cloud that floated over her, dulling her, blurring the spirit's outlines.

"Can't you guess who it is?" asked Dale.

"No. I'm always in the provinces. I'm horribly ignorant about London. I act in Leeds, Glasgow, Preston, Newcastle—places like that. I don't meet the stars."

She leaned a little towards him, put her cigarette to her lips, blew out some smoke nervously.

"Who is it?"

And it seemed to Dale that her voice was altered, that there was an unmelodious note in it.

"Mark Trever."

"Oh!"

"Of course you've seen him act?"

"Yes. I think I saw him once in—as Mercutio, I believe it was."

"But haven't you seen him in anything modern?"

"Let me think!"

She seemed to be searching.

"Oh yes, of course. Long ago I saw him in a South Sea Island play, in which everyone wore very little. It was supposed to be so tropically hot. "The Island of Dreams." That was the name. I walked on in it. But I hadn't a word to say."

"I never saw it."

"Didn't you? It was at the Garden Theatre."

"That completes the cast."

Dale folded the sheet of paper and put it into his pocket. And there was a silence. Suddenly a strange dullness seemed to have invaded the little room. Something had happened. Things were no longer as they had been. Dale felt very conscious, felt that he didn't want to meet Valentine Morris's eyes.

"It's a wonderful cast."

She had spoken.

"Yes; isn't it?"

"Which rôle does Mr. Trever take?"

"Halliday."

"Oh! The part you read with me the other day."

"Yes."

"Do leave that sheet of paper with me, so that I may know which part each one plays when I'm studying the piece."

"Certainly."

He took out the paper again and gave it to her.

"Well, I'll be off now."

He stood up.

"By the way, the rehearsal on Monday starts at eleven. You'll be there?"

"Where do we rehearse? On the stage?"

"No. Not yet. I think it'll be in the side room out of the Lacquer Room!"

"Oh."

"Good-bye," he said.

She held out her hand.

"What's your address?" she asked.

"I'll give you my card."

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" Yes, do. In case I——"

As he gave it to her he said :

" In case—yes ? "

" If I wanted to get at you."

" To-morrow ? "

" Well—yes. Will you be in town to-morrow evening ? "

" Yes. And you ? "

" I shall be back. I'm only going to Surrey for the day."

" Then let me give you my telephone number."

" Yes, do."

He wrote it down on the back of the card.

" Monday, at eleven in the room beyond the Lacquer Room," he then said, fixing his eyes upon her.

" I understand. Good-bye."

He went away feeling chilled and doubtful, feeling almost as if a catastrophe had happened.

CHAPTER VII

DALE had chambers in the Temple, but he lived at this time in Chelsea, in Tedworth Square, where he rented a small corner house. He was a bachelor and his establishment was a modest one. He had a man and his wife, who acted as butler-valet and cook-housekeeper, and a " between " maid, who was supposed to do anything she was told to do. On certain days of the week another woman came in to help. Dale wasn't quite sure what she did. But he had an idea that she dusted, pulled out and shook oriental carpets, and broke an occasional piece of china at so much an hour.

On the Sunday after the ending of the run of " The Leper's Wife " Dale stayed at home all the morning. Nothing happened. There was no telephone call. He went out to lunch. Before starting he summoned his man, Macfarlane, and said to him :

" There may be a telephone call for me ~~this afternoon~~, Macfarlane. It might be important. I don't want to keep you in on such a fine day, but I don't trust Alice —the

between maid—"to take a message down. Will your wife be at home?"

"I shan't leave the house, sir."

"But I think it's your afternoon off."

"I shan't leave the house, sir. My wife's going to see her mother. As to that Alice, she'd never get a message right. She goes deaf directly she gets to the telephone."

"Well, thank you very much. I shall be back about six."

"I shall be here, sir."

At six Dale came home.

"Any message, Macfarlane?"

"No, sir. The telephone hasn't gone."

Dale felt relieved. But his mind wasn't at ease. He knew there was danger in the air, danger for him and for his prospects. He was no longer afraid of the rejection of Valentine Morris by Champion and Grant. What he feared was that she might refuse to join the company engaged for his play. That she would throw away the really marvellous chance Fate had brought her didn't seem probable. Yet Dale was certain that when she had asked for his address the possibility of refusal had been in her mind.

"But I must have her for Magdalen," he said to himself now. "She is made for that part. No one else could play it as she could."

He could no longer imagine his play having a success if she were not in it. The fact that she was unknown, totally without celebrity, didn't influence him. She had managed during their short acquaintance to convince him that she was a woman designed for triumph. And yet now he was afraid of her fear. For he knew now that she was capable of fear.

The telephone was in the hall of his house next door to his library. He went to his library, sat down and took up a volume of Casanova's Memoirs. And while he read and smoked he was listening.

Seven o'clock struck—half-past seven. Then Macfarlane came.

"I've put out your evening clothes, sir."

"I shan't want them to-night. If I go out to dine I shan't dress. I may stay in."

"But what about dinner, sir? You haven't ordered anything."

"I'm not hungry. Perhaps I shan't dine at all."

Macfarlane, a short, sturdy man, forty-one, with dark eyes,

a nearly bald head and the bearing of an ex-regular, went out looking surprised.

At half-past eight Dale put the stump of his cigar into an ash-tray and shut up his book. Then he got up, lifted his arms above his head and stretched himself, locking his hands together. It was the physical expression of his mental relief.

"My fears, like at least half the fears a man has, were groundless," was his thought just then. "If she'd intended to telephone she'd have done it by now."

And suddenly he felt hungry. He'd be off to Soho, to a certain restaurant he knew where the cooking was excellent, and . . .

The telephone sounded in the hall. Dale's arms fell to his sides. He listened. The telephone sounded again. He opened the library door and went into the hall.

"Yes?" he said. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Who is that?" asked a voice.

"Martin Dale speaking from Tedworth Square."

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Dale! I'm Valentine Morris speaking from Tatford's Hotel. I've just come back from Surrey and I want to see you. I've been reading the play. Could I see you to-night?"

"Yes. When and where?"

"I should like to see you at once."

"Shall I come to the hotel? I don't know it. But if you'd say where, I can come."

There was a pause, which seemed long to Dale.

Then the voice said:

"I've only got a bedroom here. Could we meet somewhere else?"

"Could you come here?"

"Yes. Shall I?"

"Please do. I'll wait for you. But have you dined?"

"That's all right. Don't bother about that. I'll come to you now. I'll take a cab."

Dale looked at his watch as he went back into his library. He had never heard of Tatford's Hotel. How long would she be? His appetite had left him. But he rang the bell and ordered a couple of cocktails.

"I'm expecting a lady," he said to Macfarlane. "A Miss Morris. She'll be here very soon. Please show her in here and bring the cocktails directly she comes."

"Yes, sir."

Just before nine Dale heard a motor drive up to his door. The door bell sounded. The motor drove away. What did that mean? That she meant to stay a good while? Or that, economy being obligatory, she was going to make the return journey by bus?

"Miss Morris, sir."

"Bring the cocktails, please. How are you? Very good of you to come. This is my library. I'm a bachelor. I live here alone."

"I like your room . . . these stone-coloured walls."

She looked round. She seemed to be noticing things. But he wasn't sure that she saw very clearly, noticed with any sharpness of observation what she looked at.

"Is it a long way from your hotel?"

"Well, Tatford's is in Bloomsbury."

"I hope you enjoyed your day in the country."

"Miss Geean's got a marvellous garden. I read your play in it."

She opened a bag she was carrying and took out a manuscript.

"Here it is."

She gave it to him.

"Do sit down," he said.

She sat down near his writing-table, and just then Macfarlane came in with the cocktails on a silver tray.

"Thank you," she said, taking one almost greedily, Dale thought.

He took the other.

"What shall we drink to?" he said, as Macfarlane went out. "I know. To your success at the Central Theatre."

Valentine lifted the little glass, but she didn't lift it to her lips.

"Don't you approve of my toast?"

"Why should we drink to anything?" she said.

"Very well."

And they drank, slowly, without geniality. When they had put down their glasses he said:

"You've read the whole play?"

"Yes. I've read it twice."

"What do you—— I hope you don't dislike it?"

He felt the chill of an author's anxiety, and he felt something else too, something more sinister.

"Is the room too dark for you?" he asked. "Shall I turn on the lights?"

"No, don't. I like it as it is."

"Well? What about the play?"

She was silent, and there seemed to him something heavy and morose in her silence. His room was faintly lit by a reading lamp standing on a low table. He saw her eyes like two darkneses full of meaning, but of meaning which he couldn't understand. She seemed to be hesitating. She was hesitating. Suddenly an ugly conviction took possession of him.

"You don't like it!" he said. "You don't believe in it."

To his surprise she stretched out a hand impulsively and laid it on his knee, with a sort of caressing familiarity.

"Don't! That isn't it!" she said, and her voice was emotional. "I congratulate you. It's fine. It's a piece of life and an allegory of life too. It's big. I can see success for it, but——"

He put his hand down on hers. He wanted to kiss her just then.

"I'm glad. I wanted you to like it. What you think's tremendously important to me."

"Why?"

"Because of my opinion of you."

Her hand moved under his, turned palm upwards and gripped his hand.

"I've got something to tell you. I'm afraid I can't act in your play."

"But you must!" he said, brusquely. "I've chosen you. You want to stay in London. Champion and Grant—they've agreed to give you a trial. It's the chance of your life."

"Yes. I know all that. I know."

"Then what is it?"

"I feel I'm not quite suited to the part," she said, very slowly, dragging out the words with heaviness.

Her hand was still holding his, and now he was squeezing it tightly.

"I don't believe you," he said, brusquely.

"Somebody else could play the part better than I could."

"Who? Maud Eden?"

She said nothing.

"Who? Give me some names. Give me a name."

"I can't. I haven't had time to think about that."

"Find me a woman who can play the part better than you

can and I'll accept her. We start rehearsing to-morrow morning at eleven. Find me a woman."

"You can't expect me to do that. It isn't my business to do that."

"Very well then! I hold you to your promise to rehearse the part."

"I really feel that you had better get someone else."

"I thought you were all courage, a marvellously fearless woman, and now at the critical moment you show the white feather," exclaimed Dale, with a brutality which astonished himself.

She took her hand away from his.

"You mustn't speak to me like that! Please don't. Don't you know, haven't you ever realised, how the under things of life rise up sometimes like weeds in a river, and prevent the swimmer from going onwards, hamper him, drag him down, even perhaps——"

"What?"

"Keep him down till there's nothing more for him?"

He took hold of her by the wrist.

"Dear Miss Morris," he said. "I don't know that I'm more perceptive than most men, but I understand the why of this. I'm sure I do. I'm not going to put it into words. Don't be afraid. I won't speak it. But I know exactly how things are. I was half expecting this—your refusal. Since yesterday I've been afraid. I've been dreading the telephone. I guessed what you might do, what you had already thought of doing when you asked for my address. But you fought those men, Champion and Grant, at the theatre. You can't give in now. You can't let the under things drag you down now, and perhaps me with you. I have an instinct that this is the chance of your stage life."

"Oh, it is. I know that. You needn't tell me that."

"If you don't take it you'll probably never have another. For God's sake don't be a funk—you. Why it's out of your character to show fear, give in to fear."

"Yes, that's true. But isn't everybody afraid of something? Is there anyone who is incapable of knowing any kind of fear?"

"Perhaps not. Then be afraid, but act as if you weren't."

"D'you know—that's a big saying?" she said, looking at him with an expression that suddenly thrilled him. "Could I do that?"

"You are going to do it."

"Am I?"

She got up.

"You're more than the man I thought you were," she said. "When it comes to art I think your over-sensitiveness betrays you sometimes."

"And when it comes to life doesn't your over-sensitiveness betray you?"

"The creature that's escaped from a trap at a bloody cost doesn't care to go near the trap again."

"Your great chance! Mine! And on the other side—Preston, Glasgow, Newcastle, the land of the unknown!"

She looked down. He knew she was suffering acutely, far more, probably, indeed certainly, than he could understand. And the egotistic thought came to him.

"She'll act the better for all this if she goes through with it."

"I shall call upon you at your hotel to-morrow at twenty minutes to eleven," he said, prosaically, "to take you to the rehearsal. Tatford's Hotel, did you say?"

"Yes. Gower Street."

"At twenty to eleven."

"Very well," she said, sullenly.

She wouldn't have a cab called. He saw her walk away in the gathering darkness towards the Thames Embankment.

"Mark Trever!" he said to himself.

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT morning before a quarter to eleven Dale was at Tatford's Hotel, and asked for Miss Morris. He waited in a hall papered with mustard-coloured flowers on a buff ground while they sent up to her room. Almost directly she came downstairs with a hard, obstinate expression on her face. She greeted him without a smile, and they went out to the waiting cab.

"The stage-door of the Central Theatre," he said to the chauffeur, who drove on in the sunshine of the pensively bright September morning.

"You'll go through with it?" he said to her.

"Yes. I've made up my mind."

"You gave me a terrible fright yesterday evening. But I'm rather glad I've found a weak spot in you."

"Did you think I was morally and mentally an Amazon then? You know me very little."

"Scarcely at all. But I feel about you a great deal. Have you ever laid hold of something, the branch of a tree, for instance, a gate, or passed your hand over a door in the dark?"

"Yes."

"A certain odd knowledge of the object comes to you, even a sensation of peculiar intimacy with it."

He didn't explain further. Of course she knew what he meant.

He looked at her profile in the sunshine. It was tragic. And he seemed to see a cruel process, Life brutally preparing certain human beings to be of use in the service of art. Others couldn't be of use. Leave them alone. Let them be happy. It isn't necessary that they should know the dream and the burden, the dark ways and the lit-up peaks. But she had to suffer, and perhaps just at this time.

The cab turned a corner, passed a restaurant unexpectedly smart in a shabby purlieu of the town near a vegetable market. They were close to the great theatre now. He felt her thin, slightly angular body quivering against his, as for a moment, yielding to the movement of the cab, she touched him by accident.

The cab drew up at the-stage door as the clocks of London were striking eleven.

"We're punctual to the moment," he said, helping her out.

She didn't answer. Her face was rigid. He thought of the two managers, and was afraid.

"Play up!" he whispered. "If they don't like you they can refuse to have you even now."

Her only response was a sort of half-strangled sigh.

Three or four men were standing at the entrance smoking and talking. They stared hard at Valentine and Dale, then threw away their cigarettes and passed in after them.

"That's Dale, I'm certain," said one of them, a short white-haired man, with a colourless face and eyes like agates. "He's got the regular author's look of half-defiant anxiety. But who's the woman with him?"

Nobody knew.

"Whoever she is, she looks damned miserable," said a much younger man. "But I say, what a marvellous figure!"

"Too thin!" said a man, so blue that he looked as if he had a beard though he hadn't. "She's like a walking yard-measure."

"My boy," said the white-haired man. "The Public's got away from the pouter pigeon type long ago. That girl's long legs are an asset. Who plays the lead?"

"Nobody knows who's the leading woman."

"I'll bet you we've seen her. She's got the sort of looks that come out well on the stage."

"Like yours, Daddy!"

"Well," said the blue man. "She's nobody anyone knows. I've seen every leading English actress alive, and I've never laid eyes on that girl until to-day."

They passed into the gloom behind the scenes.

Meanwhile Valentine and Dale had made their way into the corridor behind the ground-floor seats of the auditorium, and were mounting the staircase that led to the dress circle and boxes, in silence. When they reached the gilded railings which encircled the well of the theatre close to the upstairs foyer Dale said:

"Isn't it a monster?"

"Yes. It's like a world apart, a world within the world of London."

"Doesn't it excite you?"

She nodded, but didn't change her expression.

"It needs a huge amount of food. We've got to take care that it is properly fed for the next few months. People, crowds, multitudes of people! Are you ready? Shall we go in?"

She was very pale. As she spoke her face suddenly became stolid. Somehow, by some mysterious act of the will, she succeeded in clearing it of all definite expression. Even her eyes looked dull.

"But you look like someone else!" he murmured, suddenly afraid.

Would not that blank face make a bad impression on the two managers, on the producer, the company?

"Come on!" she said, frowning.

And her voice was brusque, even harsh.

They crossed the space between the gilded railing and the foyer, passed from the foyer into the Lacquer Room, and on

into a large oblong room, with a bar close to the entrance and two big windows opening to a balcony with a heavy stone balustrade. Here they found a group of people standing vaguely near the wall opposite to the windows, in front of which stood a line of chairs. A thick-set young man with fair hair and a fresh complexion, the assistant producer, was standing close to the chairs talking to Leslie Grant and Champion. Near them was Leighton Cole flirting with a yellow-haired girl in a bright blue dress. And a little to the right of them was a very small, middle-aged woman, plump, with small hands and feet, dyed auburn hair, and a marvelously humorous face, snub-nosed, with a wide mouth and tiny laughing hazel eyes, who was talking to a young man in a Norfolk jacket and tweed trousers. This young man was tall, though not quite so tall as Leighton Cole, with broad shoulders and a slim body that looked like the body of an athlete. He had black hair parted in the middle and large deep blue eyes. His complexion was naturally fair, but tanned by sun and sea winds. When Valentine and Dale came in this man had his back turned towards them, and didn't take any notice of them. It was evident that the little woman with the auburn hair was keeping him amused, for Dale heard him laughing, and his laugh was tremendously masculine.

"Oh, there you are!" said Grant, in a businesslike way, while nearly everybody stared at the author and his unknown companion. "Good-morning. Armytage, this is Miss Morris, who is going to give us her idea of Magdalen Smith—as she's called up to now. (The name'll have to be changed.) You know Mr. Dale, don't you?"

The assistant producer said good-morning, and looked keenly at Valentine, who still had the stolid, expressionless face which Dale had noticed with misgiving.

"Mr. Trever!" called Grant.

The young man in the Norfolk jacket turned round. As he did so, or rather immediately after he had done so, his handsome face changed completely. A startled expression transformed it, making him look older, more subtle, and almost repellent. Then he smiled, and said in an agreeable, rather deep voice:

"D'you want me, Mr. Grant?"

"Just a minute."

Mark Trever came across to Grant, moving easily, even with a grace which had nothing effeminate in it.

"Miss Morris," said Grant, "this is Mr. Trever, who plays your lover in this piece. You'd better have a talk if you've got any ideas about your part. Trever, I know you've studied the script pretty carefully. Give Miss Morris any hints you can. She's new to London."

In a whisper he added :

"We're giving her a trial. We haven't signed with her."

Then he turned to Dale.

"I say, Mr. Dale——" He took hold of Dale's right arm, and began to talk to him about an alteration he and Champion had thought about which might improve the third act.

"O' course it'll have to be cut, my boy. As you've written it, it'd play for the best part of an hour. Now what we think is this——"

Meanwhile Armytage called out some orders, and certain people detached themselves from the little crowd by the wall, and coming forward vaguely, holding the scripts of their parts, began rehearsing the first scene of the play with an air of ignorance, doubtfulness and suspicion. They were interrupted perpetually by Armytage, who spoke in a loud, peremptory voice, with occasional strident invocations of the Deity.

When Grant had finished about the alteration he and Champion wanted in the third act, and Dale had given voice to the protests of the author who felt his play disintegrating when it ought to be beginning to take form and clothe itself with meaning, if not yet with beauty, Champion came up to them, and said to Dale in a very audible voice :

"Your find doesn't look up to much this morning. I don't believe she'll do. If she doesn't we shall have to put Maud Eden in the part."

"I really couldn't agree to Maud Eden."

"We are trying your girl first. If she's no good, what *we* want will have to go."

"I'm absolutely convinced not only that Miss Morris can play the part as I wish it played, but that she'll make a big hit with the public too, on one condition," said Dale, severely.

"What condition?" said Grant.

"That we let her alone, that we don't harass her, that we give her a chance to show what she can do."

Champion pushed out his lips and looked sulky.

"She's got to please Trever," he said.

"What's that?" said Dale, startled.

"She's got to please Trever. All his chief scenes are with her."

"But why should he be the arbiter?"

"I know nothing about arbiter. All I know is that Trever's a big draw with the women, probably the biggest we have. We've got to have a woman who can act up to him as he wants it. If he doesn't take to her——"

At this moment Meyer interrupted them with:

"Excuse me, Mr. Champion, but Mr. Shinkmann is here and wants to see you for a moment about Madame Reitzenstein."

"Damn the fellow! He won't leave me alone for a minute. Oh, hulloh, Dan, old chap! Glad to see you. Come into my room, will you, and have a drink!"

He went off arm in arm with a small, swarthy, big-nosed man, who spoke into his ear with an air of smiling seduction.

"For God's sake don't say it like that, Mr. Cloudesley! You aren't at a cremation. You're amused at what's happening. You're *amused*, my boy!" shouted Armytage.

Dale looked towards Valentine Morris. She and Mark Trever were standing near to one another, but they were not talking. Trever's whole appearance, Dale thought, had subtly changed. He looked harder than he had, less charming, much less attractive. Valentine had a frigid, a congealed expression. Her big eyes were defiant. Her body looked rigid. Dale went to stand close to her. At a moment when Armytage's loud voice was raised in a shout he whispered to her:

"Don't let the weeds drag you down!"

Not looking at her, he then turned to Mark Trever.

"Mr. Trever, I've not had the pleasure of meeting you before. I'm Dale, the author of this play."

Immediately Trever smiled, and a kindly welcoming look came into his splendid blue eyes.

"Delighted to meet you. I think your play's fine. I believe in it."

He gripped Dale's hand with a firm brown hand.

They began to talk cordially together. Valentine's eyes grew more sombre. She turned away and began to study her script.

"Miss Morris!" called Armytage.

Valentine started and turned towards the voice.

"Yes, Mr. Armytage."

"Your first scene, please. Sir Eden can't be here this morning, so I'll read it with you."

Without looking at Dale she went towards Armytage, who was taking up a position in front of the line of chairs.

"Mr. Dale, Mr. Trever—will you come?"

Grant was sitting down and lighting a cigar. The two men joined him.

"I want you both to see this. We're giving her a try. Champion doesn't believe in her, Trever. But Mr. Dale thinks she's a damned big find. Watch her carefully, will you?"

"Rather!" said Trever, in his fine, melodious voice.

"What d'you think of her appearance?"

"Oh, she looks all right," he said, carelessly.

"Think she suggests sex?"

"Give me time, my dear fellow. I haven't seen her for years."

"What's that? Have you seen her before then?"

"When I was quite a youngster she walked on in a play I was in, 'The Island of Dreams.' I'd forgotten all about her. But when I saw her to-day I remembered her face and those long legs of hers."

"Oh, well, this isn't a walking on part by a damned long way. So watch her carefully."

"Trust me for that!"

He lighted a cigar and leaned back.

CHAPTER IX

AT one o'clock the rehearsal was stopped till two-thirty and there was a conference in the Managers' room. Dale, Grant, Leighton Cole, Armytage and Trever were there. Champion was detained for the moment by some business, but Grant said he would be with them almost immediately.

"Well, what d'you think of her?" said Grant, leaning back in his round chair in front of his writing-table, and turning his curious dark eyes, which were sometimes plaintive, sometimes cynical, from one to the other. "What do you say, Armytage?"

Armytage, who looked hot and preoccupied, shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Seems to me there's something wrong with her this morning," he said.

"Wrong with her? What d'you mean?"

"She's nervous," said Dale quickly. "Rehearsing right up against us in those chairs, and hearing discussions about herself all the time. How can she——"

"Oh, she's knocked about enough in the provinces to get accustomed to all that," interrupted Grant. "What do you say, Mark?"

Trever sent a quick, surreptitious glance at Dale, and caught Dale looking at him.

"I shouldn't like to judge her so early on," he said, blandly. "She's out of the ordinary. The question is, with a woman like that who isn't a type but a damned individual, whether the public will hate her or whether they'll eat her. Sarah Bernhardt, they tell me, looked like a needle when she first came to London. Lots of people thought she hadn't a chance. But she took the town."

He smiled with a fine air of magnanimity.

"Do you like her, Mark?" asked Cole, with a sidelong glance of his big bright eyes.

"Tell the truth, Leighton, she isn't at all my style."

"You like them fatter, you oriental! We know your tastes!"

"Well, in a love scene I do like something I can feel when I'm holding it."

"In six weeks' rehearsals she may put on a pound or two."

"More likely to lose half a stone!"

At this moment Champion hurried in.

"We're discussing Miss Morris, Jack," said Grant.

"I can tell you something about her," said Champion, looking at Grant.

Leighton Cole showed the tooth.

"What, Jack? How many babies she's had?" he said.

"Babies! What are you talking about? She's just been taken off to lunch at Kerry's by Caroline Geean."

This remark evidently caused a sensation, though why it should Dale didn't know. Grant looked at Champion with earnest gravity. Leighton Cole, with a sort of sugary alertness, formed an O with his flexible mouth, and let out a thin whistle of falling notes. Trever suddenly fixed his

handsome features in a stern expression. As to Armytage, he exclaimed :

" You don't say ! Is Carrie Geean interested in her ? "

" Is she ? " asked Grant of Dale. " D'you know anything about it ? "

" I know Miss Morris spent Sunday with Carrie Geean in Surrey," said Dale.

" Did she though ! " said Grant, again looking at Champion.

" But who is Miss Geean ? " asked Dale. " Is she important ? "

" Who's Carrie Geean ? Well, she's one of the richest Americans over here, and a liberal backer of theatres—when she thinks she will. Her money talks in theatre land."

" I'm off to lunch," said Champion. " Come on, Lez ! We must discuss this later. See you at half-past two, boys."

Leighton Cole went away to the Garrick. Mark Trever was due at the Green Room Club. When Dale was out in the sunshine he decided to walk across the market to Kerry's. It was the nearest good restaurant to the theatre. Valentine Morris and he had passed it that morning. The fact that she was lunching there drew him to it. But he was rather disconcerted when, on coming into the gay little green dining-room, he was immediately confronted by Champion and Grant with their heads together over a couple of Bronxes. Somehow he hadn't expected to find them there. They looked up as he came in, and nodded, but didn't ask him to join them. Secrets of theatre land seemed to Dale to hang on their lips.

" A table for one, please," he said to a waiter.

But at this moment he caught sight of Valentine Morris at a table close to the window which looked into the market. And she was beckoning to him.

He crossed over to her.

" I want to introduce you to Miss Geean," she said. " This is Mr. Dale, Miss Geean."

" I saw you the other night in Miss Morris's room at the Crown," said a very soft, secret voice. " You were just going away."

And an equally soft hand pressed Dale's hand for an instant.

" Won't you lunch with us if you're alone ? "

" Indeed I will gladly. Thank you very much."

He sat down between the two women.

There was something curiously enveloping in the American's

personality. Her calmness of manner had a strange intensity in it. Tremendous will was surely wrapped up in her exterior softness. Her large eyes, dark grey in colour, looked steadily at him and were probably, were almost certainly, observant. Yet they conveyed to Dale an impression of remoteness. Her face was round and pale, with a nose slightly turned up, arched eyebrows, a harmonious but not remarkable mouth and chin. She had fascinating hair, he thought, of a yellow so pale that it seemed to have whiteness in it. She was neither tall nor short, and was dressed in pale colours, primrose yellow, grey, green that seemed fading to white. She wore a white hat and had a large square emerald at her throat. She had beautiful small hands. They looked useless, however, as if they had never had to do much for the "I" to whom they belonged. When Dale glanced at them he thought of other busy helping hands, paid to minister to a central being surrounded by service, circled by luxury. Even now, sitting close to Miss Geean, he couldn't say to himself, "She is thirty-fourty—forty-five." The delicate mystery of her made him realise how definitely most people give themselves away to the close observer. An instinct did tell him something about her though—that she was, in some way, very clever, but had no desire that her cleverness should be understood by others.

"A curious being!" he thought. "What is her origin? What her education? Is she delicate or strong? Has she passed through fierce experiences or floated serenely on the shallows of life? Is she vestal or courtesan?"

He couldn't tell, because the informant within him kept silence, being evidently at a loss.

Valentine Morris looked a fiery particle in the orbit of this moonbeam personality. And Dale felt himself to be unusually, almost outrageously definite. He knew that Miss Geean's coming had helped Valentine Morris, had made her happier. And suddenly he saw the American as a background to Valentine's new life. And for the moment Kerry's restaurant and the market outside faded away from him, and he visualised a bright star burning against a luminous evening sky.

Inevitably they talked of the play and Valentine's chances. Miss Geean, though obviously interested—she had indeed proved her interest by coming, unexpected, to lunch at this out of the way restaurant—showed no energy of interest in

the problems besetting her companions. Her warm calmness was pleasant to Dale after the turmoil of personalities in the theatre. He felt the remoteness of great wealth, saw its possessor lifted as on a throne high above the dust and the cries and the frantic striving of the moneyless world. He looked at the great square emerald and saw it as a symbol. And then one more question about Miss Geean floated up in his brain.

"Has she ever been poor?"

He saw Grant looking at them from the distance with a vital interest which he knew was caused solely by Valentine's and his seen friendship with a fortune not unconnected with the theatre. And he knew that Miss Geean's coming had given to the actress a standing in the manager's estimation which she hadn't had before.

"You don't know our two tin gods?" he said presently to Miss Geean. "They're lunching over there."

"No. And I have never seen a performance at the Central Theatre."

He was surprised and said so.

"Very big theatres seldom give the sort of work I care for," she quietly explained. "The trombone isn't my favourite instrument."

She laid a little hand on Valentine's wrist.

"Don't let them turn your viola—is it?—into a trombone. There is nothing so dreadful to me as the screech in art."

"Probably they'll tell me this afternoon that I am no use to them," said Valentine. "Screech or no screech."

"I don't think so," said Miss Geean.

As she spoke she fixed her grey eyes on the two managers in the distance.

"No. I don't think so. But even if they do your hour will come, somehow, in some other theatre."

"Oh, but I want her in my play!" exclaimed Dale, with an irrepressible uprising of egotism.

"Then make it so that she remains."

"You speak as if I had the power to dominate the wills of those two horribly concrete individuals over there!"

"Well, haven't you?" she said, gravely, almost rebukingly.

Dale felt uncomfortable and very inferior to her at that moment.

"If you two pull together," she continued. "It will be strange if you can't achieve your purpose. But I know it is

very difficult for two people of different sexes to pull together."

"Why should that be?" asked Dale.

She smiled.

"You mustn't expect a woman to explain a thing of that kind to you. Perhaps *you* know!" she added, again touching Valentine's wrist.

Valentine looked at her without answering. And just then Dale was conscious that sometimes there is a freemasonry among women.

It was time to go and a waiter came with the bill.

"Please allow this to be mine!" said Dale, stretching out his hand for it.

"But I asked you," Miss Geean said.

And that was an end of the matter.

As they passed the managerial table in going out Champion and Grant bowed carefully to Miss Geean. In the street a large limousine car was waiting. Miss Geean said a gentle good-bye and got into it. A smart boy in a cap and livery shut the door and jumped up beside the chauffeur. As the car slipped away into the market Dale saw a pair of dark grey eyes fixed upon him.

"I have never met a woman like that before," he said, as Valentine and he stepped off the pavement to walk back to the theatre.

"Nor I!" said Valentine. "She's a mystery, and perhaps because she is she fascinates me."

"How old d'you think she is?"

"Sometimes I think she's thirty. Sometimes I wonder if she's fifty."

"I too! Is her country place nice?"

"Oh no, not nice—enchanting! It's a tiny white house in an enormous garden. The house is absurdly small and the garden's absurdly large. It's near Tilford and Frensham Commons. She gallops over them on a white horse that's half Arab."

"What a wonderful person! D'you know—her coming to-day is a piece of luck for you."

"Yes. I feel more hopeful now."

"We must pull together, you and I, or she'll be very disappointed in us."

She smiled faintly at him.

"Can we? Have we the knack?"

"Let's do our best. Anyhow I'm beginning to feel that your luck is in to-day."

And then they were at the stage door.

That Valentine Morris's luck was in, really in, the afternoon went to prove. Sir Eden Lisle walked into the room with the cocktail bar at precisely two o'clock, looking as alert as a young man despite his sixty years. Having made a large fortune on the stage in London, and in America where he had undertaken three big tours, he had retired from management at the early age of forty-three. His income, as he himself allowed, was "more than ample," and he had settled down to enjoy it comfortably and sensibly, with a charming wife who had never been on the stage but who was warmly interested in all that interested her husband. On giving up management, Sir Eden had announced that he wouldn't mind acting now and then in other people's theatres if he were offered a really tempting part. During the last seventeen years he had fallen to temptation three times, and now Dale and the management of the Central Theatre had lured him back to the stage once more, Dale by a finely effective elderly part, the two managers by a business arrangement which, as Sir Eden put it, was difficult to refuse even if there was a gratifying margin between you and starvation. So now here he was, well set up, alert, spry and springy, with thick silky grey hair, keen dark eyes, an unwrinkled complexion, and that air of quiet common-sense and unself-conscious authority which made him a personality wherever he went. As always, unless he were going to some daylight function, he was dressed in a perfectly built suit of dark blue serge with a double breasted jacket that had unusually large lapels, and wore a very dark red carnation. A double eye-glass hung on a black watered-silk riband across his chest.

Sir Eden had his script in his hand, and directly he saw Dale he came over to him, greeted him with delightful courtesy, and apologised for having been away in the morning.

"An enforced visit to the dentist," he said, showing two rows of splendid teeth in an amiable smile. Then he added:

"I hope you won't have much trouble with me. I've memorised the whole of my part and thought it out even to the minutest movement—subject of course to your and the producers' agreement with my conception. Who is that young lady?" he added, lowering his rich, well produced

voice, and indicating Valentine Morris with a scarcely perceptible gesture.

In a low, eager voice Dale explained the situation with regard to Miss Morris.

"She was acting in 'The Leper's Wife' at the Crown. I found her. I think they're against her, but I have an immense belief in her. I wonder what you'll think. Your opinion is of such tremendous value in all questions of the stage."

Sir Eden didn't trouble to deny that. He put up his double eyeglass in a very casual way, and after looking about the room at various people eventually glanced through it carefully at Valentine. Then, dropping it, he merely said:

"A very admirable appearance—for *certain* parts. Her angularity is singularly graceful."

"Shall I introduce her to you?" said Dale.

"No. Let me see her rehearse first. Perhaps at the end of our work to-day. Unless I have a scene with her. But I don't think I shall yet."

And then Champion came up eager to welcome the famous actor who had "an income more than ample," and Armytage began calling out directions.

When the rehearsal ceased at five o'clock Champion begged Sir Eden to come and have "whatever he liked" in the managers' room.

"Come too, Mr. Dale," he added. "We must have a talk about Miss Morris."

"Shall I tell her to come to-morrow?"

Champion paused, then:

"Yes, she had better come to-morrow," he said. "Eleven o'clock. On trial as before. What shall it be, Sir Eden?"

"A cup of black coffee and a biscuit, if I may."

"Certainly. Meyer!"

And then the usual exhortation to winged heeled Hermes, and the silent flight to the mysterious regions.

Dale went away and came back looking hot and anxious. Sir Eden hadn't suggested being introduced to Miss Morris. Dale was afraid that the portents were unfavourable.

He found Champion, Grant and Armytage with Sir Eden. Evidently on this occasion Cole and Trever had not been invited. Probably the managers were eager to have the great man's opinion privately conveyed to them. Sir Eden's experience of the English stage was vast and unrivalled.

He was famous for his judgment in all matters theatrical. And the proof positive of the accuracy of his *flair* lay in the impressive fact that his income was more than ample and had been more than ample for the last seventeen years. A man who makes so few mistakes in theatre land that he can retire with a fortune at the age of forty-three is a man whose opinion is worth having. That Champion wanted to have it was made evident now by his question, asked with a fine show of deference to which Dale was quite unaccustomed in dealings with him.

"What do you think of Miss Morris, Sir Eden? Mr. Grant and I are most anxious to hear. She's absolutely unknown to the London public. Mr. Dale found her. She's been trailing about the provinces for years. We haven't engaged her. She's rehearsing on approval. Of course if we put a woman without a name into the lead in a theatre like this we are taking a big risk. I wanted Miss Maud Eden, but Mr. Dale seems to have a strong prejudice against her, says she's common."

Sir Eden broke a small bit off his biscuit while Grant took a pull at his whisky and soda.

"Miss Eden is a lovely creature," he said, gently.

"There!" said Champion, at Dale.

"She's worked very hard and got on well with her acting."

"Exactly what we think," said Grant, at Dale.

"She attracts the public undoubtedly."

"I should say so!" said Armytage, in his rather hectoring voice.

"But——" continued Sir Eden, taking a sip of black coffee, "she has the London accent."

"The London accent?" said Champion, raising his thick mouse-coloured eyebrows.

"When she chirps it is impossible not to know that she is a London sparrow."

There was a dead silence. In it Sir Eden took another sip of black coffee.

"Your coffee is really quite good," he said. "Who makes it?"

"Who makes it, Lez?"

"Mrs. Brown."

"Mrs. Brown, Sir Eden."

"Perhaps you'll kindly pass on a shilling from me to Mrs. Brown—with my compliments."

"Certainly, Sir Eden—with pleasure. But now what about this Miss Morris?"

Sir Eden drew out a presentation cigarette case of gold and lighted a cork-tipped cigarette slowly.

"She's angular," he then said.

"Ah!" said Champion, at Dale.

"But full of a fluid grace."

Silence.

"Her voice is beautiful. The viola type of voice."

Champion's expression indicated a struggle between an attempt at intelligence and a quite definite vagueness.

"As to her power of acting, her mastery of the gamut of expression, in movement, tone colour, facial mobility, and so forth, I'm not yet in a position to pronounce a considered judgment. But one thing I can say, and I say it with absolute conviction."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Sir Eden?"

"That girl—woman, rather, for I judge her to be at least twenty-five——"

"She's twenty-six."

"Then I'm not far out. That woman has a very striking and interesting personality. She intrigues you. She is plastic. There's nothing ordinary about her. In short she has distinction!"

Champion looked at Grant, and Grant looked at Armytage who was looking at Dale. Distinction! A word difficult to find in the vocabulary of the men to whom it was spoken. A word scarcely to their liking. (Dale was out of it. They weren't thinking of him, bothering about him.) A word that didn't "cut much ice" in the managers' room of the Central Theatre. But Sir Eden Lisle had spoken it, an actor-manager who had been able to retire at the age of forty-three with an income more than ample. And evidently in his authoritative mouth it was a word of very definite praise.

Sir Eden inserted a hand into a top pocket of his waistcoat and drew out a bright shilling evidently new from the Mint.

"Could this be given to Mrs Brown with my compliments, and a word to the effect that I have found her coffee excellent?"

"Certainly, Sir Eden," said Grant. "Meyer! Meyer!"

"Did you want me, Mr. Grant?"

"Kindly take this shilling to Mrs. Brown with Sir Eden Lisle's compliments, and say that Sir Eden found the coffee excellent. Understand?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Grant."

And Mr. Meyer hurried away looking hard at the shilling.

CHAPTER X

"OFFER her thirty pounds a week, Lez," said Champion to Grant four days later. "I'll bet you she'll jump at it. We've kept her on hot bricks till she's jolly well scorched her feet. Show her a contract and she'll be ready to sign anything so long as she signs. For the run, of course."

"Of course. Well, I can *offer* it to her. But I'm not so sure she'll take it."

"She's never had as much in her life."

"I bet she hasn't. Still for the lead here it's a pretty rotten salary. And, believe me Jack, that young woman's got a devil inside of her. I'm beginning to think Dale wasn't far out. I'm beginning to think we may have stumbled on a new star."

"I doubt it. But if we have all the better to get her at thirty a week."

"Old Lisle thinks she's going to be another Mrs. Patrick Campbell. He told me so only yesterday."

"He's gone gaga. Trever thinks nothing of her. He says she lets him down all the time with her damned underplaying. He'll be furious if she signs."

"He's doing his best to get her out. I wonder why. Sometimes I think——"

"What?"

"He said she walked on in 'The Island of Dreams' when he played in it."

"That must be ten years ago."

"More like eight. I wonder if he ever had anything to do with her."

"Why he'd forgotten all about her."

"Well, and haven't you forgotten all about plenty of girls you've——"

"Get along with you!"

He looked at his watch.

"It's just on five. The agreement's typed out, isn't it?"

"Yes. All except the exact sum per week."

"We can put that in when she accepts. Have her in now and let's get through with it right away."

"Right!"

The fat thumb pressed the bell.

"Meyer, just bring Miss Morris's agreement, will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Grant."

"And ask her to come here directly the rehearsal's over. It should be finishing now."

"I'll go and tell Miss Morris at once and then bring the agreement, Mr. Grant."

Champion went over to the window and stared out, thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his unusually wide trousers. His large, clean-shaven face, which always looked as if he had been up all night but wasn't to be 'had' in the morning for all that, mechanically assumed an indifferent expression. Grant sat back in his round chair, played with a paper knife and softly sucked his false teeth, while his expressive eyes travelled slowly round the handsome room in which so many schemes had been thought out, talked out, hammered out, knocked out or brought to fruition.

There came a light tap on the door.

Champion turned round. Grant called out sonorously,

"Come in!"

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Champion."

"Good-afternoon."

"Mr. Meyer told me you wished to see me, Mr. Grant."

"That's right. Come right in and sit down, Miss Morris."

Valentine shut the door and sat down near the writing table. Her eyes looked emotional. But her face suggested that she didn't intend to let anyone know that she wasn't calm and thoroughly self possessed.

"After a great deal of consideration and weighing pros and cons," began Grant, looking very serious, even almost intellectual, "we've decided to take a great risk, and to let you, although you haven't a name, play the lead in Mr. Dale's play."

"Yes?" said Valentine, calmly.

"Yes," said Champion, with an attempt at heavy majesty, "We will give you thirty pounds a week for the run of the play. It's a great deal to offer to an unknown actress. Still it's for the lead, and we always like to treat people well in our theatre. Mr. Meyer's gone to fetch the agreement, and we can sign it right away. Oh, here he is!"

At this moment Meyer came in holding some typewritten documents.

"Put them down, Meyer. You can go. But keep within call. We may want you to witness these almost directly."

"Certainly, Mr. Champion."

"Thirty pounds a week for the run of the play," said Champion, stretching his bull neck and raising his tufted mouse-coloured eyebrows, as if in amazement at the immensity of the sum. "Like to glance through it, Miss Morris, as a matter of form?"

"Before doing that I think I ought to tell you, Mr. Champion, that I can't sign at thirty pounds a week for the whole run."

"Why not?" said Champion sharply, and looking suddenly like a very hard and determined financier.

"Because I don't think such an agreement would be fair."

"How do you mean, not fair? To us?"

"Both to you and to me."

"I don't understand you."

"We don't understand you, Miss Morris."

"Let me explain."

"By all means," said Champion, glancing at his partner and setting his mouth in a grim expression.

"Suppose I'm a failure. As you say, I've no name. I'm entirely anonymous."

"Eh? What's that?"

"I'm anonymous—no name."

Silence.

"If I'm a failure, or even half a failure, damned with faint praise, I shan't be worth even thirty pounds a week to you."

"That's true enough. Eh, Lez?"

Grant said nothing, but kept his now rather strained eyes fixed upon Valentine.

"On the other hand if I become a big personal success I don't consider that thirty pounds a week is at all an adequate

salary for the lead in a theatre with the prestige and the holding capacity of the Central."

Champion began to look like stone.

"I don't understand what you're driving at," he said, with an odd sudden coarseness both of manner and accent.

"Nor I," said Grant. "What do you want?"

"In a month from the first night you'll know whether you've got a solid success or not, won't you?"

"A month!" said Champion. "My God! I should say so. We ought to know on the Saturday night. We're going to produce on a Thursday."

"I'll take ten pounds a week for the first month of the run."

"Ten pounds!" said Champion, suspiciously.

"There's nothing to say against that," murmured Grant.

"No. But if the play runs, from that time on I shall ask a hundred pounds a week."

"A hundred!" exclaimed Champion, as if outraged.

"Yes, a hundred. You'd have had to give Maud Eden more than that."

"Maud Eden's a big draw. Maud Eden's got a damned big name."

"And so may I have a big name and be a big draw by the time the play's run a month."

"It can't be done. It can't be done. There's never been such a contract. We offer you thirty pounds a week for the run."

"And I refuse to take it," said Miss Morris, with a sort of rigid calmness.

"In that case," said Champion, looking across at Grant, "I'm afraid we shall have to find someone else for the part."

"Very well. Shall I go on rehearsing till you've made another arrangement? Or would you rather I stopped from to-day?"

Champion seemed about to speak when Grant frowned at him.

"My dear Miss Morris," said Grant. "You're really cutting your own throat. Think what a chance you have here! Why if you succeed your fortune will be made. When the run here's over you'll be able to ask whatever you like in the future. Thirty pounds a week is a splendid salary. Many young women would be only too glad to get half of it. And then the chance of acting with people like Sir

Eden Lisle, Cole, Trever, and in a theatre known all over the world."

"Dear Mr. Grant, don't imagine I don't see the advantages."

"Well then—let's sign and have done with it."

And with a genial, an almost tender smile, he put a hand on the documents Meyer had brought in.

"No, I can't. If I succeed I shall be worth more than a hundred a week to you."

"More!" exclaimed Champion, almost with passion.

She smiled, not without satire.

"But I'm ready to take a hundred."

Champion's large, heavy face took on a dusky red hue.

"After the first month of the run. And ten up till that time."

"In all my experience of the theatre," said Champion, with either feigned or genuine indignation, "I have never met an unknown actress with such cheek as yours, Miss Morris."

"Then I'm very glad to have been able to enlarge your experience, Mr. Champion. Shall I go?"

"Go?"

"Yes. In any case we can't sign to-day, can we? Even if you accept my——"

"We don't," exclaimed Champion. "Not by a long way!"

"Do you wish me to rehearse to-morrow, or shall I consider the matter at an end?"

As she spoke she got up and stood by the table, drawing a pair of long, rather worn, grey suede gloves through her long fingers.

The two managers stared at her in silence. Then Grant said:

"You may as well come to-morrow, Miss Morris."

He turned round to Champion.

"Maud Eden isn't in town, is she, Jack?"

"No. She's gone to Dieppe. But we can get on to her first thing to-morrow."

"Good! In any case we'll expect you at rehearsal to-morrow morning, Miss Morris."

"I'll come—to oblige you. Good-bye, Mr. Grant. Good-bye, Mr. Champion."

When the door closed behind her Champion uttered a sentence containing at least two words which are familiar in certain naval and military circles, but which are seldom heard at a Mother's Meeting. They didn't seem to surprise Grant, who only said:

"What's the good of that junk, Jack?"

"What's the good? What's the—of all the——"

He repeated the two words and added some brother-words to them.

"That won't get us anywhere, Jack. We should have offered her a straight fifty a week from the start and she'd have taken it."

"Would she? Well, now she'll get nothing, and can go to the devil with it."

"That's all gas. You know as well as I do we've got to have her."

"Got to! I know nothing like it. Why have we got to have a cheeky hussy like that, without even a name, when Maud Eden——"

"Chuck Maud Eden, Jack! She hasn't the personality for the part. This girl's going a long way. We're up against a big proposition. I feel it. We were trying to do the mean on her and she wouldn't have it. She knows her value."

"Then she can damned well go and get a hundred a week from somebody else. She's not going to get it from me."

The fat thumb went to the bell mechanically. Meyer appeared. He looked surprised at seeing the two managers alone, and his eyes seemed to pop from his face in an unbridled energy of enquiry.

"Bring the whisky, Meyer."

"Certainly, Mr. Grant, I'll bring it right away."

"And now, Jack, let's talk this thing out. Temper won't carry us anywhere. This girl's got the devil in her and d'you know what that means? It means that she's going to succeed and *knows* it. We've got to keep in with her."

CHAPTER XI

THAT day, after leaving the manager's room Valentine found Dale anxiously waiting for her at the stage door. The rest of the company had dispersed.

"Oh, you waited! Let's walk, shall we? How dry London feels this September. Brian is by the sea."

"You don't wish you were?"

"Perhaps I shall be almost directly."

"You don't mean that—what's happened?"

"I've given Champion and Grant an ultimatum about my salary. They called me in to sign an agreement."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, on a note of relief.

"But I refused to sign it."

Dale looked at her, and it seemed to her that for an instant there was menace in his eyes.

"D'you know," she said. "I believe you are a true artist."

"Why? What makes you say that just now?"

"Because I believe you're an inhuman brute. We've become friends. I daresay you would declare that you were fond of me if——"

"I am fond of you," he interrupted her.

"And yet directly your play seems to be threatened you become my enemy. I saw menace in your eyes just now. Oh, you don't know how cruel you can look!"

"But you say you refused to sign!"

"I did. They offered me thirty pounds a week."

"Only thirty!"

"And I offered to take ten."

"Ten? Are you mad?"

"My dear, perhaps I am. There have been times when I thought I was." She lowered her voice. "There will be such times again; and perhaps more dangerous times, when I shall be mad and not think I am."

"But why say you'll take twenty pounds a week less than they offer you?"

"This is why . . ."

She explained. Dale looked frankly aghast.

"You see the method in my madness?"

"Valentine, you mustn't do this."

"Do what?"

"Wreck my play and your whole future on a miserable question of money."

He stopped on the pavement. She had to stop with him—or leave him.

"Go back—now."

"Go back?"

"Yes. Tell them you'll take thirty pounds a week."

"But I won't take it."

"I'll make it up to you out of my royalties. I'll give you

the extra seventy pounds a week. I swear I will. Every treasury night I'll——"

"My dear, I don't want your money. Walk, or we shall have a crowd round us. There are two pairs of silk stockings interested in us already."

"We must take a cab."

"You want to hide my shame?"

"Here's one!" (He thrust up an arm.) "Get in. Go to 7L Tedworth Square. It's a corner house. Now what is all this nonsense? How could I defy Champion and Grant at such a critical moment?"

"But I don't want to go to Tedworth Square!"

"Do you actually wish to be put out of the cast?"

"Do I?"

Her voice and manner were suddenly changed. She looked at him with eyes that were terribly grave.

After a long pause she said:

"Don't ask me such questions. The mixture that is me can't find, perhaps, a quite truthful answer. Wasn't it Pilate who said, 'What is truth?' I say it too. Don't look so desperate. One must never look desperate in a taxi. A taxi is the wrong setting for desperation."

Dale sat still for a moment and didn't say anything. It was obvious that he was trying to grasp calmness, as a man may try to grasp an opiate which he knows can conquer the acute pain he is feeling. She saw his nature reaching out, rigid, like an extended arm. Presently he said:

"What I want to know is whether you are a very determined business woman, or whether you wished to contrive a means of being put out of the cast."

"Well, I think thirty pounds a week for the whole run was a mean offer."

"So do I."

"Then why attack me?"

"I only want to make it up to a hundred a week and keep you."

She put her left hand on his hand.

"You *do* believe in me. It's extraordinary. And I love your carelessness about money."

"And don't you believe in yourself now?"

"Yes. I could give a performance of that part which would astonish London. And do you know why?"

"Because you've got the temperament and the talent to——"

"The real because is this—because I should be acting with Mark Trever."

Her frankness struck him like an unexpected blow. He had known. And she, of course, must have known, did know that he knew. But never a word of that truth had been uttered between them. And he had not expected that it would ever be uttered. Yet now like a stone thrown by her hand it struck him.

"Don't say anything," she added quickly. "But when we get to your house I'll come in. I don't think I meant to, but now I will."

He obeyed her. He was glad to obey her, for he didn't know what line to take. And he was still afraid, terribly afraid of what she might do.

"Don't keep the cab," she said, when they arrived at his house.

He sent it away.

When they were in the library she took off her hat quickly, as if it had been irritating her, and stretched herself out on his sofa. But she kept her head high on a big cushion there was.

"No, no, nothing!" she said. "And I won't stay very long. But I think perhaps I owe it to you to tell you something."

And then she was silent.

"Tell me this," he said at last. "Do you think they mean to refuse your conditions?"

"They did refuse them."

"With theatre people, refusals, acceptances, all the things that are usually binding, seem to mean very little."

"I know. Don't I know?"

"Well then—what do you think?"

"I think Champion—perhaps—wants to get rid of me. I think Grant doesn't want to. I'm sure Grant has come to believe in me. And I know that Trever is trying all he knows to get me kicked out."

"Trever!"

"Yes, Trever. And I love Trever."

"Oh—Valentine!"

"Yes—that's how it is with me! You don't like Trever, do you?"

"Oh I——"

"Do you?"

"Not very much."

"Nor do I. But I love him. That's how it is. I thought I had escaped from a trap I was in years and years ago. But you led me back into it, and the teeth have closed on me again. You did it all. You did it—and just by words."

"Words?"

"Yes, when you said, 'Then be afraid but act as if you weren't.' Words, just words, can have a tremendous effect on what I call the soul. The right words. You found the right words to make me do what you wanted. That was diabolically clever of you. But now——"

"Yes? Now?"

"I couldn't tell even you exactly why I behaved as I did to-day. But it was as if once more something within me took charge. You remember?"

"Yes."

"At the same time," she said, in a more casual voice. "It was damnably mean of them. Either I am worth nothing in your play or their theatre, or I'm worth more than thirty pounds."

"And if they refuse you mean to go? You mean to chuck me?"

"I must now. I've given them an ultimatum. So there's no open door, no way out."

"Unless——"

"No. I've got quite a good appetite, but I could never eat my words to a man like Champion."

After a silence he said.

"And which do you wish it to be—an acceptance on their side or a refusal?"

"I don't know. And perhaps I shall never know. But if they accept my conditions then I promise you I will see this thing through."

"I shall pray to-night," said Dale.

CHAPTER XII

AFTER a long colloquy with Grant, and an even longer one with Sir Eden Lisle, Leighton Cole and again Grant, Champion "climbed down," and within a couple of days of Valentine's confession to Dale she signed an agreement which Champion described as "the most preposterous document I ever put my name to, bar none." When Meyer had flown away with the manager's copy of this unholy deed Champion said to Grant:

"I've had enough of all this. I'll leave you to break it to Trever. He'll be damned angry, I can tell you."

"He isn't master here."

"No. Seems to me there isn't a master. Seems to me there's a mistress."

He thrust his hands far down into the pockets of his immense trousers.

"If that woman Morris should make a success on the first night then God help us all; that's all I've got to say. I've seen a few female bullies in my time, but she leaves the lot of them standing at the starting gate. And without a name to bless herself with! Anonymous, as she calls it! Anonymous, and does us in for a hundred a week! Well, you can tell Trever, I won't."

And he stuck a cigar in his mouth and went off to the Rams' Club to play poker.

That same day Grant mentioned the matter in a very casual way to Mark Trever.

"We've signed with Miss Morris. Couldn't find anyone else and she seems fairly satisfactory. Besides we got her dirt cheap. We're starting her at ten quid a week. But that's between you and me, my boy—strictly."

"That won't ruin you," said Trever, in a colourless voice.

"You like her all right, don't you?"

Trever shrugged his broad shoulders. He was magnificently made and fascinated a certain class of women by his 'build.'

"I don't mind her. But she plays down all the time."

Grant stared for a moment with his very intelligent eyes.

"She's keeping a lot up her sleeve," he then said, in a very significant voice.

"Think so?" Trever said, as if startled.

"I do. I think she's going to spring a big surprise on you all."

"Well, I hope she doesn't keep it till the first night. I like to know where I am with the woman I'm playing with."

"My boy, you can hold your own damned well with anyone."

"Oh, as to that—You don't tell me she's getting ten quid a week right through the run, do you?"

"That's to be settled presently. She starts at ten quid a week. But don't mention it."

"She won't draw even that to the theatre."

"Not the first night perhaps. But there's other nights besides the first night."

"You all seem gone gaga on the woman."

"If we are that may mean that a few thousands of the public may go gaga on her too. We aren't all as rocky as you about a seductive woman, Marky. But then you've been spoilt, my lad. They've fallen to you too easily."

"People talk a lot of rot about that."

Grant smiled.

"By the way," he said carelessly, "How did she look in 'The Island of Dreams?'"

"Good Lord, that's a century ago! She was a mere kid then and I wasn't much more. Besides she only walked on. I had nothing to do with her."

"Ah!" said Grant.

After a moment of the staring silence characteristic of him he said,

"An undressed sort of play, wasn't it? I seem to remember."

"Yes, for England. But if you'd been round the Paris shows as I was before I went to America you wouldn't say so. Why one girl at the Moulin Rouge was dressed in a diamond. And it wasn't the Koh-i-nor either."

Grant sucked his false teeth.

"If only we hadn't got that damned Censor!" he said, "How we could pull 'em in! The B.P.'s simply waiting for it with their tongues out. But say what you will over here it's always the Bishops who get the last word."

"I thought you made a speech about cleansing our stage from impurities the other day at a meeting at His Majesty's."

"Eyewash, my boy, eyewash! We have to do it. You

know that. But how we could pull 'em in if only—my God!"

"Cheer up, old lad!" said Trever. "We're on the way."

And then he went out smiling. But when he was on the other side of the door he wrinkled his sunburnt forehead in a frown.

* * * * *

Four days before the first night of Dale's play at the Central Theatre Champion said in the manager's room,

"I've got the biggest financial interest in this house and I'm not going to sit down under this sort of thing any longer. I was always against engaging that woman. I never believed in her. First place she's only a bag of bones. But we might get away with that somehow. We might kid the public into thinking they like to hear the lead rattling. Second place she doesn't know how to fit into a cast. She plays for herself. She stands right away from the people round her. But what's going to ruin our chances is her damned underplaying. Trever's bedrock right. She lets everyone down, him especially. She's got this damned mania for what they call 'natural' behaviour on the stage. You can't be natural on the stage, or if you are then you aren't either seen or heard. Was 'Sarah' natural? Wasn't she a dove one minute and a tigress the next? Was Henry Irving natural? I tell you that woman's going to ruin us and something's got to be done about it before the first night"

"What d'you propose to do?" said Dale.

His white face looked worn, ravaged almost, and his dark eyes had a burning in them like the burning of fever.

Champion didn't answer. He was walking about the room. Dale looked at Grant and at Armytage.

"I'm not happy about it," muttered Grant.

"I've done my best," said Armytage. "But she won't fall in with my views, thinks she knows better than I do."

"Perhaps she does," Dale jerked out, in a voice that had suddenly become hoarse under the influence of suppressed emotion. "Perhaps she knows better than all of us. Perhaps she's the step forward people are waiting for."

Champion turned and stared at him with his lustreless pocketed eyes.

"In God's name what d'you mean?"

"Art doesn't stand still, does it?"

"I don't know what you're driving at."

"Stagnation's the forerunner of death," said Dale, with fierce uneasy obstinacy. "Art must move onward and——"

"Oh, my God!" said Champion. "Stop him someone! What are we going to do, Lez?"

A dull flush covered the whole of Dale's white face. He opened his lips. If he had spoken just then Champion wouldn't have forgotten it in a hurry. But somehow, by an interior effort which seemed to him enormous, he managed to keep control. And he shut his mouth without speaking. And as he did so he thought,

"She'd have let loose if all hell had tumbled about her."

For once Grant seemed to be and to feel helpless.

"Damned if I know!" he said.

After a moment he turned his big head towards Dale.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked. "Are you happy about it? It's your play. I suppose you know how you want it acted."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Dale. "I don't know any longer. All these arguments and disagreements have killed any knowledge I may have had once. I—I scarcely know what the play's about any more."

"That sort of junk doesn't get us much farther," said Champion. "What we want to know is whether this woman you forced on us satisfies you now you've got her."

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Sorry!"

"See here, Lez, this has got to stop. Ring the bell, will you."

"What's that for?" said Dale.

"You'll know in a minute. Meyer!"

"Yes, Mr. Champion?"

"I believe Miss Morris is on the stage, isn't she?"

"I believe so, Mr. Champion."

"Go down and ask her to be good enough to come up here at once."

"Certainly, Mr. Champion."

Meyer gone, there was a long silence. Champion looked out of the window, presenting his big back to the room. Grant, who was smoking a cigarette—he smoked all day, sometimes cigarettes, sometimes cigars—stared at his writing table, and moved his lips keeping them together. Armytage, who had the scarlet, tired-out appearance of a naturally sanguine man in a state bordering on exhaustion, pawed his features with a

thick-fingered hand, played with his tie, pulled at his soft collar, gazed at his convex nails, then again pawed his features. Martin Dale sat perfectly still. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead which remained less white than it usually was.

After an interval which seemed to Dale interminable, and during which he felt like one sinking in a mysterious quick-sand of misery and impotence, there was a knock at the door and Valentine Morris came in, looking hard and defiant and with repelling eyes.

"Mr. Meyer asked me to come up. Do you want me?"

"Yes," said Grant. "Please take a seat, Miss Morris."

Valentine sat down quickly.

"Yes?" she said, looking from man to man, and finally letting her eyes rest on Champion.

"We aren't satisfied with the way the play's going, Miss Morris," he said, in answer to her eyes. "None of us is satisfied."

Dale moved, but she didn't look towards him.

"I suppose you mean you aren't satisfied with *me*, as you sent for *me*."

"That's about it. This play's a woman's play. It's got big parts for three men. But it's a woman's play."

"I know that."

"And it hangs on you."

"I know that, too."

"If you aren't right the whole thing goes phut."

"Quite true."

"And we think you're not near right."

"I didn't say——" began Dale.

But she stopped him.

"No, because you're too chivalrous. But you know as well as I do, and much better than Mr. Champion, Mr. Grant and Mr. Armytage, that I haven't been right up till now."

"What? You acknowledge you can't play the part?" said Champion. "And yet you won't take Mr. Armytage's ideas!"

"Oh, I'm quite sure I know better than Mr. Armytage."

"Then why on earth——"

"This is why on earth. You won't let me alone. You won't trust me. You won't believe my ideas are of any value. You won't give me even an inch of free hand. I'm perpetually being pulled up at rehearsals—pulled up, pulled up! I'm

never allowed to get into my stride. And mind you I'm not a plater."

"A plater!" said Champion. "What d'you mean?"

"I thought you raced."

"So I do."

"Then don't you know what a plater is?"

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Champion.

"How can I win a Derby for you if you never stop tugging at my mouth and savaging me? Mr. Armytage has a positive genius for interruption. He ought to sit in the House of Commons."

"If you'll excuse me, Miss Morris——"

"But I decline to excuse you, Mr. Armytage. I know far more about a woman than you do or ever will. And I refuse to play this part as if Magdalen Smith were an epicene man in woman's clothing. I know what she would feel. You don't. I know how she would behave. You don't. I know how she would love, and suffer, and mount through suffering. And you don't. All you know is the positions. And the positions are only the merest ground work. Now what I ask is this. And you'll have to give it me or you'll have one of the biggest failures you've ever had in this theatre. I ask you to give me to-morrow—not to-day, I'm tired to-day—to-morrow a full rehearsal of the whole play from start to finish, on the understanding that there's no one allowed on the stage except the actors and actresses, that no one comes to my dressing room between the acts, that I'm not pulled up once—not even once—and that no comment is to be made on my performance until the last word of the play is spoken. Then I'll come up here and listen to anything you may have to say to me or of me. Do this and I'll give you Magdalen Smith as I conceive her. That's what I've never done yet. And that's what I never can do till I'm allowed to *feel* her. Oh, how I've been trying to feel her through all these weeks—and haven't been allowed! Never! Not once!"

Suddenly she sprang up, walked quickly to the wall of the room close to the door, and stood there with her back to them all and her face to it. She bent her head down. Her shoulders moved for an instant convulsively. The four men remained where they were staring at her. Then Dale, as if irresistibly moved, got up and went towards her, saying:

"Miss Morris—dear Miss Morris——"

She turned round sharply. There were tears on her cheeks.

"Don't! Don't!" she said to Dale, spreading out her hands as if to keep him away.

She raised her voice.

"Now will you do as I ask? This man—" she pointed to Dale, who was still close to her—"has written a very fine play. Will you give him and me a fair chance? Will you?"

An intense sharpness had come into her usually rather soft and dark voice. It had a fierce edge to it. It had suddenly become a voice that would "carry" very far.

She moved away from the wall and walked up to Champion who was near to one of the windows.

"Mr. Champion, you've never believed in me thoroughly, I know. You've always had doubts about me. You've never really wanted to have me in the theatre. But here I am, and you've signed an agreement with me for the run of the play. Your policy is surely to get the best you can out of me."

She looked into his big face and evidently read the sullen and coarse obstinacy in it, obstinacy of the man accustomed to servility in his little Kingdom of the Theatre and now openly defied. She must have read it for she said, in a suddenly cold and even dull voice,

"I've made up my mind that either I'll have that rehearsal to-morrow or I'll go out of the cast."

"You can't!" said Champion, savagely.

"But I will!"

"You've signed for the run. You're under contract."

"I don't care. I will go, and I will not come back."

"Such reputation as you have in the provinces will be ruined."

"I suppose it will. I daresay you'll see to that. But I shall go. I've made up my mind to have justice—or go."

"What's it got to do with justice? This isn't a law court."

"I ask for justice—for Mr. Dale's play and for my talent. Now, do you give me that rehearsal?"

"Give it her, Jack, for God's sake give it her, and let's have a drink. Meyer! Meyer!" (The thumb was on the bell).

"Mr. Grant?"

"Bring the whisky. That's all right, Miss Morris. Don't bother to stay any longer. The usual time to-morrow, and we'll give you a straight run through on the stage, and no interruptions."

"Than' you very much, Mr. Grant. I am very grateful to you. I will try not to disappoint you."

And then she was gone.

Champion's big face was purple.

"How dare you, Grant?" he exclaimed, his voice rising into a roar. "If you dictate to me I'll break our partnership, and take my money away. And I'll do it from one day to another."

Grant got up from his round chair. His dark eyes were shining.

"Don't be a fool, Jack. Can't you see? Can't you hear? That girl's damned cheeky, I'll allow, but she means what she says, and, my boy—what an actress!"

"She was *not* acting!" Dale exclaimed, indignantly.

"I don't need you to tell me that. What I mean is that she's got big stuff in her and showed it just now. Jack, we aren't going to be fools. We'll give her what she asks—a straight run through to-morrow. She's got big stuff in her and—" he laid a hand urgently on Champion's great arm—

"She's got Carrie Geean for a friend. Don't forget that?"

"Carrie Geean! What do we want with Carrie Geean?"

"One never knows when a rich backer will come in useful. Drink up, boys!"

CHAPTER XIII

"IS everybody here?" said Grant, on the following morning at eleven o'clock, standing on the large stage of the Central Theatre.

"I think so, Mr. Grant," said Armytage, in a loud weary voice.

"Very well. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Champion and I are not entirely satisfied with the way this play is shaping, and we want to see exactly what is the matter. We've decided to go right through it this morning from start to finish without interruption. It'll be practically a dress rehearsal without the dresses and make up. I'm sorry you'll be kept rather late from your lunch, but for the good of the play I'm sure you'll make no difficulty about that. Now Mr. Armytage you can go ahead. Curtain up!"

As he walked off the stage he stopped for a moment by Sir Eden Lisle.

"I hope you don't mind, Sir Eden. We had to do it. Fact is Miss Morris demanded a straight run through without interruption, said she couldn't get on without it. She wants to show us her conception of Magdalen Smith—we're sticking to Smith after all, she made such a fuss about it—and says she can't do it if she's pulled up. I don't want to inconvenience you."

"I was engaged to lunch at the Garrick at one thirty with Sir Selby Smith."

"I'm awfully sorry."

"Work comes first. Miss Morris is probably right. I noticed of course that things weren't going too well."

"D'you really believe in her?"

Sir Eden opened his fine eyes more widely.

"She's got a remarkable personality, and a very original method, so far as one has been able to judge of it. I hope to be more certain this afternoon."

"We should be."

"We shall act with some properties of course?"

"Yes, chairs and tables and so on. Start in, Armytage, and no interruptions. Go right through the play."

"What d'you say to this, Cole?" said Mark Trever to Leighton Cole in the wings. "What the devil's up? We shall be kept here till three o'clock at the earliest without a morsel of food. Who's put them up to this rot of a straight run through without any interval?"

"If I ever permitted my lips to utter that loathsome thing, a bromide, I might conceivably say '*Cherchez la femme*,' my dear fellow. As it is I have no answer ready."

"Well, I think it's a damn shame."

"And so do I. But is there anything in life that is not a damn shame? Suppose we take Ireland. Now Ireland——"

But Trever had moved away frowning. For reasons considered by him as fully adequate he had worked his hardest to get Valentine out of the cast. He had failed. And now he felt that her influence was beginning mysteriously to spread in the great theatre. This rehearsal was for her. She must have asked for it. And Leighton Cole knew that.

The curtain was up. The dark auditorium gaped beyond the proscenium. Valentine Morris made her first entrance.

About midway in the stalls sat Champion, Grant, Dale, and

THE BACCHANTE AND THE NUN

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two other men: Joe Lounsberry, who was a paid "adviser" to the two managers and who read many plays on their behalf, and Bronson, who was Champion's private secretary and very "thick" with him. To them were presently added Hawkins, the scene painter, and Armytage.

Lounsberry looked like a beard with a man entangled in it, but that man had a vast knowledge of everything connected with the stage. Bronson was small, about thirty-five, with coal black dreadfully smooth hair, and tiny eyes set very close together. He had a thin reedy voice, and a manner which gave you the impression that whatever he meant it certainly wasn't what he said. He had been with Champion for many years, and was supposed to be Champion's *dame damnée*.

Seven critics for Valentine.

The first act went on its way smoothly. Everyone was practically word perfect.

"We could produce to-night as far as the words go," said Grant to Champion, who merely grunted.

Dale, who was in a fever of nervous anxiety, and his own most terrible critic, saying perpetually to himself, "Is this dull?" was still as a stone in his seat behind the managers. He was alone in his row, the six other men being all in front of him. During the pause after the first act he noticed that there was no discussion about Valentine's acting. Champion said nothing about it to Grant, but sat with his huge shoulders hunched sunk in an apparently gloomy silence. But when the second act finished he got up.

"I'm going round!" he exclaimed.

"What for, Jack?"

"To tell that woman she hasn't got over. Good God! Why she might be in her own drawing-room. Just strolls about as if there wasn't any theatre in front of her at all."

"Leave her alone till it's finished, Jack. We promised her."

"Promised her? What about my money? I stand to lose more than anyone else if this show's a failure. What do you say, Bronson? What's your opinion?"

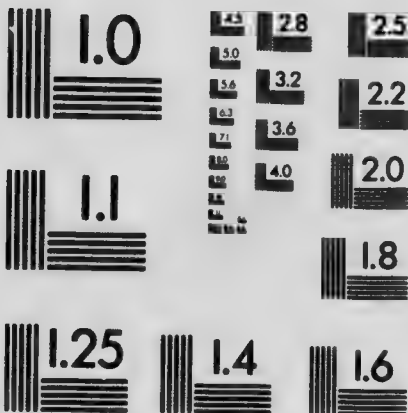
The little man shook his smooth head and lifted his reedy voice.

"It may be natural, Mr. Champion, but the question is will it get over? Will the pit get it? Will the gallery freeze on to it?"



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"That's it exactly. You've hit it. And I say it won't get over, not by a long way. Lounsberry!" (He swung round to the beard.) "I ask you—is she any good?"

The beard made a side turn towards the right. A pair of Scotch terrier eyes emitted a yellow gleam. And there fought its way through the quickset hedge of grey bristles a husky voice which said:

"That woman's going to be damned great, but she wants a crowd to play with. She's a sensitive with a very acute brain. As to temperament she's full of it. She's not showing the half of what she can do because she gets no response. Fill the house—" the beard made a sweeping circular and upward movement—"and there'll be electricity about."

"Just what I think, Joe!" said Grant.

"She's beyond me," said Armytage. "I believe in giving it them. This isn't the Little Theatre."

"Well anyhow—" began Champion, about to go.

But Grant got hold of him by the arm.

"Say whatever you like at the end, Jack. But let her alone now. If you don't she'll walk out."

"Not she! That's all bluff!"

"I assure you it isn't bluff!" exclaimed Dale, getting up desperately. "I know her. If she's disturbed she will go. Mr. Lounsberry's right. I——"

"Hush!" said someone.

The third act had begun. Champion sank heavily into his stall.

"I've never seen such a set of funks in all my life!" he muttered in the darkness. "Anyone would think that woman was Duse and Bernhardt rolled in one the way she——"

"I say, Jack, give it a chance for God's sake! A lot depends on this."

Again there came a very faint involuntary "Hush!" And this time Dale saw that Hawkins, the scene painter, said it, and was certain that Hawkins said it without intending to, because he was absorbed in the play and didn't want to miss a word of it. And Dale suddenly felt a strong affection for Hawkins, an exquisite reliance on Hawkins's judgment and a great, uplifting hopefulness because of Hawkins.

"Hawkins knows," he thought.

And a glorious great contempt for Champion's opinion swept through him.

When the third act was over the seven men were silent in

the darkness. For a time that seemed long to Dale not a word was uttered. Then a match was struck, and a little flame showed a segment of one of Champion's great cheeks and a bit of his predatory nose as he bent to light a cigar. Grant heaved a deep sigh; almost a shuddering sigh it was. What did that mean? Lounsberry's beard was still, very still. He seemed more totally lost in it even than usual. Dale was certain that it was, must be near two o'clock or past. Yet nobody seemed uneasy for lunch.

When at last someone spoke he—it was Armytage—said, "Sir Eden Lisle's fine. Say what you like about new methods these old fellows do know their job."

"Sir Eden's only sixty," said Grant, who was fifty-eight.

"Well, it's so long since he retired that——"

"What d'you think of Trever, Hawkins?"

"He'll be all right. The women'll eat him. He knows just what they want, and there's not another chap on the London stage that can give it them as he can."

"Ah!" said Champion, on a heavy note.

Grant looked towards him and Dale, behind, leaned a little forward.

"That's what a theatre like this wants, people who know what the public are after and can ladle it out to them."

"And *her* conception of the public and the artist!" Dale thought, actually shivering with disgust.

"Leighton Cole'll make a big success," said Armytage.

"Old Di Barton's damn funny. But she's always damn funny," said Grant.

"She's as safe as houses," said Champion. The public's been laughing at her for forty years and they aren't going to stop laughing now."

Still not a word about Valentine Morris!

Champion now held a murmured conversation with his *âme damnée*. Dale caught the words: "That's nothing to me, Bronson. I haven't been in the business for twenty-five years without . . . I don't care if it is. The public don't want new methods . . . eh? Of course they're after pretty girls. Show me the man that wants ugly ones . . . If I don't know the public then find me the man that does—what's that? Yvette Guilbert did you say? . . . d'you ever hear her first songs? . . . I tell you they were unprintable in English . . . religious later on as much as you like—Oh we can all be that when once we've got 'em . . ."

Grant sighed deeply again and shifted in his stall. Armytage spoke to him. Hawkins joined in. Only Lounsberry was plunged in immobile silence. Dale felt terribly curious about Lounsberry ; and presently moved and sat exactly behind him.

"Mr. Lounsberry!" he said, leaning forward.

"Well, my lad?"

"What d'you—do you like her now?"

The beard made a turn to the right, swept round almost into Dale's white face.

"Like's a word I turn in with 'nice,' 'pleasant,' 'bright,' 'cheery'—bunk that means as much as 'hope you're well this morning.' D'you know what that woman's going to do?"

"What?"

"Put every one of the job lot acting with her to bed."

"Job lot!"

"Oh, they can act in their way, and old Lisle will be fine. But—" a gnarled hand came out of the beard mysteriously and found Dale's right arm—"the audience will come out talking and thinking of no one but *her*."

Faintly a gong sounded behind the scenes. The seven men settled down to the last act.

* * * * *

The play ended and there was a deadly silence. Then Armytage got up and hurried to the door which led to the stage. On the stage Valentine, Sir Eden Lisle and Trever broke the position. Trever looked at his watch and said something to Sir Eden. Valentine, standing now by herself down stage, looked toward the gaping darkness of the theatre as if expecting some word, some sign. But none came.

Champion was the second man to move. He shook his shoulders, then got up. Armytage appeared on the stage.

"What's the time, Armytage?" Champion called out, in a voice that sounded angry.

"Just three o'clock," Trever answered. "I suppose we can go and get something to eat at last?"

Grant stood up.

"Dismiss!" he said. "Armytage!"

"Yes?"

"Of course nothing more for to-day, except the scenic rehearsal. The Company can go."

"Right, Mr. Grant."

"Come on!" said Champion, brutally. "I'm starving."

"We've got to see her," said Grant. "She's expecting it."

Valentine turned and walked off the stage.

"We'd better see her later. We've got to get something to eat."

"Let's get the seeing her over. I know her. She'll come right up to our room. We can't keep her hanging about while we go and eat. Come on, Mr. Dale. I say, Joe——"

He leaned over and began whispering to Lounsberry. Hawkins slipped away. The scenic rehearsal concerned him very specially. As he went he drew from the side pocket of his loose dusty jacket a packet of sandwiches. Champion was going sideways towards the end of his row of stalls followed by Bronson.

A charwoman dawned on the dusk, and faded away against the mysterious background of the unlighted auditorium.

Dale moved off.

What was going to happen now? He knew what *he* thought. He knew, it seemed, what Joe Lounsberry thought. But what did Grant and Champion think? Champion was incalculable by Dale. There seemed to be no common ground on which they could stand together. To Dale there seemed to be something granitic in the huge manager who was always thinking of the public and money. Dale hadn't found in him the human spot yet. Grant was different. There was something of the artist in Grant, and Grant was human even in his obstinacy. Champion was so abominably financial that he seemed to Dale to be perpetually grinding art with all its refinements, its pleadings, its wistfulness, its yearnings, down under the hoof of his contempt. "Will it pay?" Was there any other question in the mind of that man?

Dale passed through a doorway, mounted some steps and found himself in the wings. He couldn't see Valentine. Nor could he see any of the company. The word "dismiss" had doubtless sent them in search of food. Dale wasn't hungry. He heard a step and Grant joined him, looking grave even to solemnity.

"D'you wish me to come up to your room, Mr. Grant?"

"Of course you must come. Where's Champion?"

"He's gone on, I suppose."

"Where's Armytage? Armytage! Armytage!"

"Here!" cried a loud exhausted voice from the distance.

"Come up to my room. Where's Miss Morris?"

"In her dressing-room, I think."

"Tell her we'll expect her."

"Right!"

"Not a hint of what the verdict would be! Dale stared at his companion. But he could read nothing definite, though Grant's face seemed to him, as it nearly always seemed, to be full of expression. He was an expressive man. The odd thing was that Dale, though a keen observer of men, never could make up his mind as to what exactly the expressiveness of Grant meant.

They found Champion drinking a whisky and soda with Bronson in the managers' room.

"Miss Morris coming?" he asked, as they came in.

"Armytage has gone to her dressing-room. She's sure to be here in a minute."

"Ah! They'll have to get through nipper next time. We must have the curtain down by eleven twenty at the latest."

"That'll be all right."

And then there was a long pause. Dale noticed with surprise that Grant didn't take a drink. Nor did he sit down in his round chair as usual. He remained standing and didn't fidget.

"All right, Bronson. See to those letters, will you?"

"Yes, Mr. Champion."

Bronson went out.

Champion crossed to the window and stood with his back to the room, looking out. And Dale was held in a silence that began to seem to him enchanted, but with a sinister enchantment.

At last the door opened and Armytage, his face mottled with red, appeared.

"Where is she?" said Champion, turning round. "Hasn't she——?"

"Oh come in Miss Morris!" said Grant.

And there was Valentine; a human question, piercing, demanding silently to be answered.

"Come in, Miss Morris. We want to see you. Sit down. You must be tired," said Grant.

"Oh no!"

But she looked tired in a feverish way, tired as a woman can be when she is painfully alive.

She sat down, and there was a silence. Then "Shut the door, Armytage," said Champion.

"Oh, I beg pardon," said Armytage.

And he shut the door, and then there was another silence.

"Press the bell, Lez, will you!" said Champion, in an irritable voice.

The thumb mechanically did its usual work, but Grant said, "What is it, Jack? D'you want——?"

Meyer appeared.

"Bring some tea for Miss Morris, Meyer," said Champion.

"Certainly, Mr. Champion."

"Thank you very much," said Valentine. "Well?"

There was something pathetic in the word as she said it, and Dale longed to break through this barbaric silence. But it wasn't for him to do that. Somehow all his mind was now concentrated on Champion. He disliked Champion. He felt dreadfully ill at ease with him. He believed even that he despised him. And yet it was his opinion that Dale was anxious to have, and not at all because he had the most money in the big theatre and so, too, the most power. Valentine, he noticed, was looking not at Grant but at Champion. Did she feel as he felt? Was she concentrated as he was concentrated?

"Well?" Champion said, heavily.

He seemed oddly uneasy and looked almost awkward, almost loutish, as he stood by the writing-table with his hands thrust into his trousers pockets.

"Of course," said Valentine, "it's easy to make excuses, and it's generally a great mistake to make them. But I wish to say that I believe I acted very badly, on account of not having any audience—real audience of the ordinary people—to help me. I didn't realise how terribly I should miss them in that part. It's a wonderful, really wonderful part, a part of a lifetime. I don't expect ever to get another so fine. I didn't do it any sort of justice I'm sorry to say—until the last act."

Her voice changed as she said the last four words. She stopped. Then she added, very simply, without conceit but with great conviction:

"In the last act—I don't know why—I was suddenly able to do my best. I don't feel that I shall be able to act any better than I did to-day in the last act, even when I have an audience. So I put in a plea for the first three acts, but not for the last. If you thought me bad in the last act all I can

say is that I don't expect ever to be much, if any, better in that than I was to-day."

The only rejoinder made to this speech came from Champion. And what he said was this :

"Oh, here's Meyer with your tea! Put it here, Meyer. That'll do."

Meyer went. Valentine, with an excited hand, poured some tea into the cup and sipped it, looking, now intensely, at Champion. Grant seemed sunk in a dream. Armytage roared emotional eyes, that might have meant congratulation, but that might quite as easily have meant passive hysteria. Dale had dropped into a chair. He felt burning hot all over his body. He had absolutely nothing to say. If they had turned to him, if they had asked him to speak, he knew that he couldn't have done so.

Champion took his hands out of his pockets, then thrust them in again.

"The last act," he then said, "is worth more than the other three acts together."

"I was bad in the first three acts," Valentine said.

"Well, you weren't much good, not in my opinion," said Champion, shoving a plate containing three fresh sponge cakes towards her.

"I'm sorry," she said—humbly. "I think, I feel sure I shall be better when there's an audience."

"Maybe. Let's hope so," said Champion.

And again there was silence. Valentine, with a shaking hand, took a sponge cake. Perhaps a couple of minutes, ghastly minutes, passed. Then Champion exclaimed abruptly, in a brutal voice:

"The first three acts were pretty rotten, Miss Morris."

"I'm frightfully sorry. I thought so too."

"But in the last act you pulled out great stuff—drama, damned big drama. I'm pretty tough, I believe, but you knocked me out, and I'm bound to say so."

He blew his nose surprisingly with a large yellow silk handkerchief.

"Damned big drama!" he repeated, looking defiantly round at Armytage, Grant and finally at Dale. "But it was rooted in nature, and that's what got me beat."

And then without another word, and still looking hard and defiant, he walked out of the room.

Valentine began to cry.

CHAPTER XIV

ON the last Monday evening in the month of November of that year, a chilly, sodden evening of soft rain and drifting leaves, Martin Dale put on a heavy overcoat about half past eight o'clock, took an umbrella and went out for a walk. He had just dined alone at his little house in Tedworth Square, and was smoking a briar pipe. A comforting thing a well seasoned briar pipe on such a dismal evening deepening into a dismal night. Dale pitied the man who didn't smoke. Indeed he pitied quite a lot of men, smokers as well as non-smokers, as he walked sturdily on in the darkness, his short, broad figure enlarged by the coat which his tailor had quite unnecessarily padded at the shoulders. But he pitied them comfortably, as a man in a warm bed under an eiderdown in winter pities the poor wretch whom he hears singing for a living outside his house in the snow.

"If he sings so badly and so late he must be terribly poor!"

And then a pulling up of the eiderdown and a folding of the hands in sleep.

Dale made his way to the Thames Embankment, and walked slowly along by the river, noting the mysterious effects of darkness and of light, feeling the mystery of the enormous City and feeling simultaneously the mystery of his own life in it, till he was opposite to the yellow glow of the Savoy Hotel. Then he turned up a narrow street to the left, crossed the Strand, and presently stood in front of a great building lit up by flaring torches. At the entrance to it there were huge red pillars decorated with flutings and ornaments of gold. A brilliantly lighted hall showed through an immense open doorway. And against each of the pillars leaned a board painted white on which in big black lettering appeared the two words, "House full."

Dale stood in the roadway and looked at those words. Then he moved, walked a little, saw a little more.

"Stalls Full." "Dress Circle Full." "Upper Circle Full." "Pit Full." "Gallery Full." And then again "House Full."

And it was a Monday evening, the least prosperous evening in theatreland.

All the mental agony had ended in this, had been tending towards this. And he remembered the little theatre where "The Leper's Wife" had been given, and the old lady who made a mistake with her camp stool and her bag of buns, and Valentine's voice saying "We've got a terrible frost, haven't we? Nobody wants to come near us." And he remembered another saying of hers: "Oh, how I long for a crowd, for the Central Theatre full to the walls! An empty theatre is like death. A crammed theatre—oh, it's life to me, fullness of life! Will it be full for your play and shall I be there?"

And now she was there, and he looked at those boards, and he read again the two words: "House Full."

Life with its gifts and its denials!

It was still wonderful to Dale—this happening. And yet already he was beginning to be accustomed to it. It was still wonderful: and yet already he could foresee that a time would come when to be successful would seem quite natural to him, when perhaps to be rich would also seem quite natural to him. He was not rich yet, but money was flowing into his bank at the rate of four hundred pounds a week, and the management of the Central Theatre was about to put on an extra matinée every week, bringing the number of weekly performances up to nine. And offers for America were coming in. The play was a solid success and even Champion, who was not an optimist in things theatrical, expected it to run for ten months or a year. Dale might, without foolish conceit, consider himself "made" as a playwright. And Grant had told him only a few days ago that, counting America, provincial rights and rights in the British Colonies, the play could scarcely bring him less than fifty thousand pounds and might bring him more.

Dale had already decided to give up bothering about the Law. "House Full" was changing his life. Was "House Full" also going to change his nature? But surely a man's nature cannot change. And what about a woman's?

In catchpenny stories, as of course Dale knew, the most marvellous and stunning successes fall into the laps of heroes and heroines. He was a man in life, a man with a little house in Tedworth Square, full of sensitiveness which he desired to hide, and will which he didn't wish to show too much, and aspirations, and contempts, and reluctances and depressions, a man in life and by no means a hero, and yet here he was suddenly taken by the complexities of success.

"House Full!"

People hurried past in the dark, dismal November night, and they didn't know who the short, broad young man with the pale face hovering near the red and gilded pillars was, didn't know that he was the man who was feeding the great greedy theatre and was being fed by it.

Dale thought generally along lines laid down for himself alone. He wasn't the slave of other men's minds. Nor was he, at any rate as yet, the slave of habit. He was a clever man with an original mind and a perhaps unusually clear insight into his fellow men and women. He studied men and women, not only because it was natural to him to do so, but also deliberately, consciously, of set purpose. He also studied, or tried to study, himself, and in order to aid himself in that difficult branch of learning he kept a diary. That diary had been written up with unusual fullness since the production of his play at the Central Theatre. In it he had propounded a question, "Can a man be a victim of success?" He was thinking of that question now as he looked at "House Full."

And a woman? Can a woman be the victim of her own success?

Valentine Morris's success had been very great, immediate, unquestioned, never in doubt. Lounsberry had been right about her. The huge audience had supplied her with wings. All that she had missed at rehearsal in the first, second and third acts, she had found without difficulty on the first night. She had completely conquered both critics and public. Her success might be, had been, called sudden, but Valentine knew how she had worked for it. She had been "trailing about" the provinces for years, ever since she was seventeen, with the exception of those few months during which she had "walked on" in "The Island of Dreams." She had toiled for nearly ten years. She had drudged and suffered, lived in squalor and often in great poverty, for nearly ten years before she had set her seal on the waxen public of London. Her success had been painfully earned. The public didn't know, or care about, that. But she knew it, and Dale knew it.

And yet he asked himself now whether Valentine was the victim of success. And he had written in his locked up diary in Tedworth Square:

Possible victims of success. Man. Woman. A man who though he has ideals in art has few ideals in life. In his work

has eyes on the Future. In his life inclined to souse himself in the Present. Possibly sentimental, but has a mind that despises sentimentality. Sensual, but often angry at being so.

Excessively sensitive but contains in his temperament strong possibilities of hardening. Has an incurable strain of secret irony, directed not only against others but also against himself. This tends at moments to make him pitiless. Has a great longing for luxury but no desire for the fat and succulent ease of idleness. No orthodox religious beliefs yet no capacity for being satisfied in the full sense of the term by what are generally called worldly things. Might not great success harden such a man, render his irony more pitiless, his love of luxury more dangerous to him? Might it not lessen the sensitiveness which though often a curse to himself is probably an asset in his art life? Might he not easily be changed by success to his own detriment?

A woman who, perhaps because she is obscurely aware of possessing exceptional gifts, is naturally arrogant, so much so that she cannot help showing this arrogance at certain times, although she has no success, no fame, no "position" to serve as a basis for it. In poverty, obscurity, even in failure—i.e. The Leper's Wife:—still keeps a hold on this native arrogance. It is evidently part of her "make up." Must issue from a profound belief in her superiority to all ordinary people. This arrogance leads her at times into recklessness. She takes the bit between her teeth and bolts far beyond the limits of caution. Very courageous. Probably has physical courage. Certainly has moral courage. The latter sometimes affirmed and shown by defiance. Brian. Capable of love uncombined with respect or even liking. Capable of cruelty. Intensely individual, therefore, probably, intensely egotistic. By nature is very likely what is usually termed "a bit of a bully." Resolved to stamp her seal on others. Very little wax in her apparently. Yet can love and go on loving when treated badly. Query—sensual love? Worship of a Body in the Pagan Spirit? Prolonged lust, perhaps, which she defines as love and believes to be love? Has religious aspirations of a strongly emotional kind. Has also in her a great love of the world and its glory. Greedy and yet independent. Might not such a woman be easily changed by success to her own detriment? The detriment thought of artistic—or moral?

There the entry in the diary had ceased. It had ended in the air. No finality about it. But in a diary which is for himself alone a man is delightfully free from the fetters which either are fastened on him by others, or, if he is a big man, which he fastens on himself in art.

Dale walked into the great entrance hall of the theatre. On the right was the Box Office for advance booking, on the left the Box Office for current booking for that evening. From the latter a rosy middle-aged man gave him greeting.

"Evening, Mr. Dale! Come to see we aren't cheating you? Wonderful isn't it for a wet Monday evening! And we must have refused hundreds."

"Good-evening. The advance booking been good to-day?"

"Good? Tremendous. We've got a winner this time and no mistake. Why don't you go round and have a look at the pit?"

"By Jove, that's a good idea. I will."

And he turned out again into the night and went to the pit door. As he bent down to the payhole a voice from inside said,

"No room in the pit, sir."

He bent lower.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Dale! Good-evening, sir. D'you want to go in?"

"Only just for a minute to have a look."

"You won't see much, I'm afraid. They're standing in rows. I heard someone say the management's been warned twice last week by the County Council."

"I'll make myself as small as I can. Hallo, Sergeant, just let me through an instant, will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Dale. Good-evening. It's a jam. Almost as bad as Saturday night."

Almost as bad!

Dale exulted. Success, success of this kind that one could see and feel, jostle against even, was vitalising. The swing door gave and immediately he saw—backs.

One of the minor miseries of Dale's life was that he was a short man. He hated, he loathed being short. And he also disliked very much being so broad in comparison with his height. He had a striking head which in a half-length photograph looked like the head of a tall man. Why the devil wasn't he tall, instead of being, ugh, the hateful but expressive word!—stocky? In the pit of the Central now he

couldn't see a thing. The stage was totally blotted out from his view by standing people taller than himself. He heard Sir Eden Lisle's perfectly produced voice. Then he heard Cole less easily, Sir Eden again, then Valentine. They were in the second act, well on, not far from the end of it. He listened to Valentine's voice without seeing her, listened attentively.

Sometimes the voice of an unseen person tells more to the listener than the voice of that person seen. So it seemed to be now to Dale, as he stood just inside the pit door. He felt Valentine in her voice. He considered her in her voice. He tried to judge of her, not as an actress, but as a nature, by her voice. He tried to get near, very near to her, through her voice.

It was a beautiful and very individual voice, soft in *timbre* as a rule, neither high nor deep, mellow, a voice of dark colour. As he listened, Dale thought of a purple pansy, and then of a damask rose. Nearly all the critics had written something about Valentine's voice. It was distinctive, *her* voice, unlike the voice of anyone else. And she was very individual, as a woman should be who had a voice like that. Seductive she was. (He was feeling her in that voice.) And what else? He realised that there must be a capacity for sadness in one who had such a voice. And yet there was great vitality in it, and surely sensuality. It did not sound very English somehow. But Valentine never imitated—unless she mimicked deliberately. And Englishness in voices comes often from imitation.

A voice like a viola. Miss Geean, who hated the screech in art, would surely never hear it coming hideously from Valentine's lips. Valentine's diction was good, though not so good as Sir Eden Lisle's. But his was wonderful. That voice—was it the voice of good or evil, of truth or humbug, of kindness or cruelty? It didn't quite tell you that. As there is mystery in the viola, so there was mystery in Valentine's voice. It either didn't choose, or hadn't the power to reveal everything, the whole nature of the woman whose it was.

The curtain fell. The backs shook slightly as the hands in front of the standing bodies applauded. And Dale turned to go out.

He made his way to the stage door, where Brewster greeted him cordially in the voice that suggested a wine vault with

avenues of vats. How cordial a theatre is to the man who is giving it plenty of food!

"Fine house, Mr. Dale! The best Monday night I've ever seen since I've been here. But I always said we was going to 'ave a success this time. The first time ever I clapped eyes on Miss Morris I says—to that Harry, I think it was—I says: 'If that's the new lead she's going to bring us luck.' There was a look about 'er. The letters she gets! You wouldn't believe it! They keeps coming in all the time. I'll lay there's some queer ones among 'em. Going in, sir?"

"Yes. I'm just going to look in on Miss Morris. And are Mr. Grant and Mr. Champion here?"

"Are they? Well, I should say so. It's a bit of all right watching a success, ain't it?"

His naturally ironical expression was almost submerged in smiles.

Dale left him.

Valentine's quarters—she had a large sitting-room as well as a beautiful dressing-room—were on a level with the stage, and quite near to it. On the stage quantities of stage hands were furiously changing the scenery. Dale dodged them and achieved the opposite side, turned to the left and knocked on a door. There was no answer. He knocked again harder. This time the door was opened by Mrs. Blount.

"Hullo! Good-evening! You here? Why, you were with Miss Morris at the Crown!"

"Yes, sir. Miss Morris would have me here. It took a bit of doing, but I'm engaged as her dresser from now on."

Another command issued by Valentine! The woman who was necessary, and knew it had risen up out of the ashes of the unnecessary woman.

"And the change in myself?" thought Dale.

And he knew that he felt harder, bolder, more self-possessed than he had felt two months ago, even a month ago. And he felt success like a corset bracing him up. But Valentine was beginning to trample. And he—would he ever do that? How clearly he saw her in the new light success shed upon her. He wondered whether he saw himself as clearly, as accurately, as he believed he saw her.

The sitting-room had a good many flowers in it. Miss Geean remembered Valentine with flowers. And others, too, sent them. Valentine knew many people now. It was amazing how many people she knew. But what was more

amazing was the instinctive way in which she selected from among those now anxious to know her the important, the influential, the talented, the way-makers of the world. Already her rejections were ruthless. In them she showed her nature.

"Why complicate your life with the ordinary?" she had said to Dale. "I've lived among ordinary, horribly ordinary people for twenty-six years, because I couldn't help it. The power o' choice wasn't mine. Now it is, and oh, what a lot of human beings I'm going to avoid!"

Wasn't that the artist in life, usually called by those who knew nothing of any art the snob? And yet—and yet?

"I'll tell Miss Morris you're here, sir. She'll be changed in a minute. She's got a lady with her."

Mrs. Blount was about to go towards the dressing-room door when there came a tap on the door of the sitting-room.

"Oh, dear—there's another!" murmured the dresser.

She opened the door, and Dale heard her say:

"After the next act? I'll see. I'll go and ask her."

Then she returned, holding a card, crossed the room and disappeared into the dressing-room. Almost directly she came back, leaving the dressing-room door open.

"Martin, dear!" called the viola voice.

"Yes?"

"Sit down, there's a lamb. I'm coming directly. Carrie's with me."

"Don't hurry."

"I never hurry!"

Mrs. Blount at the door was saying:

"Miss Morris is very sorry, very sorry indeed, but she can't. She has a long change and——"

"Blount!"

"Yes, madam?"

"What are you doing? I want you. Just say 'No,' and come here."

"Yes, madam. Madam says no."

Another artistic rejection evidently.

Mrs. Blount hurried back to the dressing-room. Dale sat down in an arm-chair, lit a cigarette and waited. He glanced at the big, well-furnished room. Brian was there among the flowers as he had been at the Crown Theatre. Dale hadn't seen him yet. For Valentine was still *sur la branche*. The play had only been running a very few weeks. And for the

first month her total salary had only amounted to forty pounds. But now she was drawing that hundred pounds a week which Champion had been so angry about. There was no trouble about that salary now. And Valentine had large ideas about the future, very large ideas. Till now she had always been poor, and had lived mostly in theatrical lodgings in the Provinces. But evidently she had never been reconciled to the comparative squalor which had been her lot. Evidently she had been haunted by desires for luxury, beautiful surroundings. Her plans for the future were no niggardly plans. Sometimes Dale with his four hundred pounds a week wondered how she was going to do it all on the hundred a week that was hers at present.

He heard voices talking in the dressing-room. Light streamed in from the open door.

"What are you doing in there?" called Valentine's voice.

"Smoking and thinking about you."

"Nasty thoughts?"

"Yes, very."

"You're a brute. D'you know, Carrie, that man is a brute? He lives in irony as a sardine dies in oil. Is that right?"

A soft murmur came in reply.

"I wonder how many leading women would wear a gown like this, a cheap, off the peg, badly-made gown. But that brute made me. I was humble and obedient then. Wasn't I, Martin?" she added, coming into the sitting-room with Caroline Geean.

She went up to him and gave him a light kiss.

"I do that to him because he thinks he's made me," she said, "whereas really I've made him."

"Have you got to the inevitable already?" asked Miss Geean, greeting Dale, in her quiet, unemotional way.

"What is the inevitable?" he asked.

"That you two should be jealous, each of the other's success. There is scarcely anything so fatally certain of engendering jealousy as a shared success."

"Then," he said, "I suppose there's no hope for Valentine and me."

He looked at Valentine. She wore a plain dark grey gown that had obviously not been made by a good dressmaker. It fitted, but that was all. To any woman looking at it it said, almost audibly: "She took me because she couldn't afford anything else." Valentine said of it:

"The fact of my being a virtuous woman would exude from every seam if the beastly thing wasn't practically seamless."

Dale had loved her for consenting to wear it.

"Every time I see you in that dress," he said, "I realise what an artist you are. I'm sure you're the only leading actress in London who puts your rôle before yourself. However much you change, I think you will always be dominated by your artistic sense. All other actresses whom I know are governed by personal vanity."

"Change!" she said, fastening on the word, as if with teeth. "Why do you say that?"

He saw Miss Geean looking at him with her curiously steady grey eyes.

"And you said it solemnly too!"

He thought of his diary, and was silent.

"D'you think I'm changing?" Valentine asked him.

"Oh, yes."

"The fact of having more money, of knowing more people, of living in a different way needn't mean inner change."

"No, of course not."

"Isn't he irritating?" she exclaimed, turning to Miss Geean. "That man has a power of irritating me which is quite extraordinary. Because I'm leaving Bloomsbury and setting up house in Wilton Crescent he thinks my soul is changed—and for the worse, of course."

"Well, if I had to live in Tatford's Hotel I should very soon belong to the criminal classes!" said Miss Geean.

"Oh, but you are one of the fortunate beings who have never known poverty and squalor—the smell of boiled cabbage in bedrooms."

Dale noticed that to this outburst Miss Geean made no reply, but something—what was it? The way she stood, or what? seemed to gather that once she had perhaps been poor. She was wearing a pale green silk cloak bordered with ermine, and several enormous emeralds. But perhaps she had known the smell of cabbage in bedrooms. Yes—surely she had. But it must have been very long ago. He had a sudden longing which seemed to him born of something bigger, more essential, than curiosity to know the facts of Miss Geean's career. But had she ever had a career? He had never heard of it. Those whom he knew in London who knew her accepted her as one of the

numerous very rich Americans who have made Europe their home, and who undoubtedly greatly increase the amenities of Europe for Europeans.

"Curtain's up!" called a voice beyond the door.

Almost immediately afterwards there was a knock, the door was opened, and a voice said:

"Your scene, Miss Morris!"

"You're not going, Martin? I'll see you again?"

"Yes, of course."

"Are you going back to your box, Carrie?"

Miss Geean looked at Dale as if she were considering something.

"Presently."

"Miss Morris!" called a voice.

Valentine disappeared, looking suddenly intent.

When she was gone, Miss Geean sat down on a big sofa by the table where Brian's photograph stood. Dale lit another cigarette. He was standing. The feeling of success, acute, stinging, made him restless. He wanted to do something remarkable quickly, immediately, to assert his talent, or to assert his masculine power in some way, his strength of character, strength of will, firmness of purpose. This success breathing all about him was wonderful, but it wasn't enough. Suddenly he wanted to conquer again, to conquer the Future, to mount, to shine, to blaze out in the world.

"You are unquiet," said Miss Geean's soft voice.

"Yes. And how quiet you are!"

"She's a restless being."

"Were you ever restless?"

"Perhaps not physically. But what is physically?"

After a pause Dale said:

"Do tell me. Did you foresee her success?"

"Yes. That is why I decided to know her."

Something in Dale revolted against this remark. And it was the same thing which revolted against Valentine's determination not to know the unimportant, the unsuccessful, the ordinary, the humble, the poor. A decision against life, any human life, seemed to him the decision of a brain, and perhaps of a heart, too restricted in vision.

"You haven't had long to wait," he said.

He sat down. Suddenly there came to him a desire to discuss Valentine with this curious woman, whom he didn't yet understand.

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"No. But she was ready when I first saw her. She was a point. I knew that."

"You know a great deal, Miss Geean. I feel that always when I'm with you."

She slightly moved her shoulders under the green silk and the ermine. Her cloak was open in front, but she kept it over her shoulders. He saw a white dress, a white throat, emeralds. The almost white yellow hair looked very soft and careful under the lights. Careful! This woman was surely very careful of her life. And Valentine was very careless. Wasn't she?

"Will she develop in her art?" he asked, as she said nothing.

"Yes. Are you going to write more for her?"

"I'm writing something now. But she doesn't know it."

"Why?"

"She might try to interfere. Don't tell her."

Miss Geean smiled.

"You're afraid of her. Many people will be that, I think. It's a great power, the power to make people afraid of you."

"But surely an ugly one?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nearly all the great ones have had it, I think. If you would be great there's one thing you mustn't be."

"And what's that?"

"Soft."

Dale thought of his companion as an ermine muff with a pair of iron hands hidden inside of it.

"She's begun to bully this theatre already," he said.

"Yes. But the theatre likes it."

"So far. And later on?"

"She has only to go on being successful, and she can go on bullying theatres."

"Are you fond of Valentine?"

"Yes; but not so fond as you are."

Dale felt that he reddened. This explanation of him by her startled him.

"Naturally I——" he stopped. "This common success has linked us together, perhaps."

"And are you happy in it?"

"Tremendously, in a way. And yet——"

He stopped. He seemed to be searching himself; searching, and he found—wasn't it a core of melancholy?

"And yet—yes?"

"I'm ever so much happier than I was. Success does buoy one up. If we'd had a great failure here, she and I, I should have been desperate."

"She wouldn't. She's a great fighter."

"Yes."

He thought again of that native arrogance. Valentine would always have a weapon with which to fight the world. And this curious woman? Had she ever had to fight? She was cradled in ease and luxury now. She was softly wrapped round in apparently great wealth. And yet again the instinct in Dale whispered to him: "It hasn't always been so with her."

He saw in her steady grey eyes for an instant a look like a closing door.

"And she's safe enough now," he said. "Unless she rushes ahead too fast. This house in Wilton Crescent, furniture, pictures, oriental carpets—she has large ideas."

"Could a woman who can act as she can have small ones?"

"No; possibly not. But I don't suppose she knows much about the management of money. She seems to think a hundred pounds a week is the purse of Fortunatus. I shouldn't be surprised if she ran up debts."

"I should be very much surprised if she didn't."

"But what's going to happen then?"

"I don't think she'll worry about that."

"You think she'll be quite happy in mortgaging the future?"

"Oh yes. You wouldn't."

Again Dale felt slightly uncomfortable. He thought of those stout brass-clamped doors with, some feet up, a tiny eyepiece with a movable shutter. The shutter slips back noiselessly. You are observed, and can see nothing but the wood of the door.

"No," he said, with a tinge of defiance. "I prefer to know exactly where I stand. And so I'm sure do you."

"Valentine will float about quite comfortably at the edge of abysses. And remember this: she's put the debts, and the abysses, and the mortgaging of her future, and even the little son with no legal right to a name—she's put them all into your play."

"And something else too!" he thought.

But he didn't say that to her.

"Let us take her as she is, Mr. Dale, and be thankful for her."

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"I am thankful for her."

Two great emeralds gleamed on her white fingers as she drew her silk cloak over her breast.

"I'm going back to the box now. I want to see her big scene in the third act."

"How soft that ermine looks!"

She stroked the fur at her throat. When she did that her small hand looked voluptuous.

"I like soft things with my body," she said. "But my brain approves of many hard things."

"I'm sure you've read lots of Nietzsche and agreed with it all."

"I've read some. But I'm not a great reader. Still, I've got a good many first editions on my shelves."

"What haven't you got?" was his thought, as he went with her to the door. "Emeralds, first editions, tapestries!"

"I'll leave you in your box and then go to the managers' room."

"Thank you."

She went on in front of him, walking softly, stealthily even.

"Which door do you want to go out by?"

"The iron door on the right as you face the stage. I'm in the box next the stage on that side."

"On the ground-floor?"

"Yes."

They stole along by the wings among dusty men, hearing the loud voices of those on the stage.

"From here it sounds artificial," he whispered.

"Except her voice. Listen!"

They stood still for a moment. Valentine was speaking.

"Yes; she sounds natural."

They heard the fine voice of Trever. Dale frowned, saw the grey eyes looking, made his brow smooth.

The iron door opened slowly. They left the peculiar world.

CHAPTER XV

CHAMPION had treated many women badly during a life in which his position as a theatre owner and manager had given him power over women. Because of that he was alive to the signs that foretell the approach of the revenges of women. The flow of money into the coffers of a theatre is wonderfully consoling. It enables many a man to bear up bravely under tribulations unconnected with money. But as the success of Valentine Morris grew, and as it seemed to separate itself from Dale's play, from Grant's production, from Hawkins' scenery, from Champion's triumphs of organisation, from the whole theatre in fact, with all its notoriety, prestige, beauty and focused talents, Champion began almost to hate it. He had said before the first night: "If that woman's a success, then God help us all." Now that help didn't seem to be coming to him.

What irritated him specially was the social success of his leading lady, the murmur of which became very loud in his ears. Miss Morris was being received, was even being eagerly sought, by all sorts of important and influential people whom he didn't know, and whom certainly Grant didn't know. Grant was purely a man of the theatre, and didn't care a damn about anything smart or socially brilliant. As to the "intellectuals" and "highbrows," he couldn't be bothered with them, and never bothered about them. He had a genius for "production," had been brought up in theatres, and knew the English stage from A to Z. No one in England was more competent than he was to put a big play on the stage in the most effective way possible. His interests were bound up with and limited by the theatre. And he had absolutely no social aspirations.

But Champion had a wife, whom he persistently betrayed, but whom he wasn't able to ignore. She knew, had long known, of his marital infidelities. She put up with them, had to put up with them. But she "took it out of him" whenever she saw a chance of doing so. And though he so cynically and openly was false to her, he was nevertheless afraid of her. She was a vulgar, showy woman, with a strong desire to shine, to be noticed, to be successful, to be talked about. Sexually she was cold. In the place of love and desire

she put social ambition. She had no children. She had no lovers. Her husband was perpetually and openly "mixed up," as she phrased it, with other women. But he was rich, and she made him give her plenty of money. He had what she called "a position," as a financier of plays and part-owner of an important theatre. She considered him "a magnate," and played the part of a magnate's wife, concentrating on clothes, entertainments, first nights, bridge, race meetings, dancing, gambling, and "knowing people."

They had a lustrous house in Park Lane, shining with ostentatious luxury. Their car was of course "a Rolls." They gave parties. Mrs. Champion "went everywhere," cruelly painted, cruelly over-dressed, cruelly vivacious, with the terrible smile of eternal youth fastened upon her pinched lips. In certain "circles" she was a "somebody." But she never had penetrated, never could penetrate, beyond the theatrical and *nouveaux riches* sets. She was a cabbage rose. The orchids wouldn't have her. The celebrities at her parties were the celebrities of the theatre, and of the semi-shady and lower financial worlds. Among them she might, perhaps, be rightly called "a leading spirit." And this was something. But unfortunately she persistently longed to be of those written about in the top paragraphs of the social column in the *Daily Mail*.

Mrs. Champion was one of the human beings whom Valentine Morris now found herself in a position to avoid; and Valentine Morris avoided her, blatantly, without scruple or pity. She just simply wouldn't have anything to do with Mrs. Champion. And Champion heard of this in Park Lane. For after the first night of Dale's play Mrs. Champion, scenting Valentine's coming celebrity, had endeavoured to take possession of her, with the intention of moving up in the social firmament keeping a tight hold on the new comet's tail. But Valentine had shaken her off. And now Mrs. Champion was obliged to see from afar the woman whom her husband had "made" passing happily into the regions she had never attained to, even shining in them quite comfortably.

Champion was told about all this. For Mrs. Champion had few reticences when alone with her unfaithful husband. And she was one of those repetitive women who think that a statement increases in devastating force by being said again and again. She was also persistent where it was absolutely useless to be so. She was so stupid that she couldn't give in

when she was beaten. She took a pride in "carrying things through" that couldn't be carried through. The consequence of this unfortunate trait in her nature was that she wouldn't take Valentine's definite "No" for an answer, and urged her husband to bring about what she had failed in accomplishing.

"You have made her. Without you she'd be drudging about the Provinces. She can't refuse to come to us if you ask her."

But Valentine did refuse quite calmly. She had developed a marvellous power of saying "No" since she had become a success. She was polite to Champion, but she made him understand that she was only connected with him for business reasons, and had not any intention of allowing him and his wife to come near to her in that part of her life which ran its course outside of the theatre.

"She's the biggest snob I know!" said the exasperated manager to Grant, to his wife, to anyone who would listen to him.

But he knew the exact value which Valentine now had in his theatre. And that value was great. Whether it was "a laster" he couldn't yet tell. But for the time being she was the most talked-of actress in London, and dirt cheap at the hundred pounds a week which she was getting. And the way the "big bugs" had taken her up was astonishing.

And maddening!

But—and this was strange—secretly Champion worshipped Valentine's talent. Once he had made her cry by his unexpected appreciation of her acting. She had never forgotten that phrase of his—scarcely his it had sounded; like another's phrase mysteriously wrung out of him—"rooted in nature." The man had penetration, subtlety even, and under all his coarseness a sensitiveness that could be reached by refinement grounded on truth. It must be so. And as he secretly worshipped so she secretly sympathised with something in him.

But she didn't mean to be a friend in his house. And she didn't mean to have him and his awful wife as intimates in hers.

She was in Wilton Crescent now. The house she had taken wasn't large, but it was very convenient, and contained some good rooms. There were three bathrooms. There was a charming long room built out at the back which Valentine had made into a "living-room." It wasn't a reception-room.

It wasn't exactly a library. It was just a cosy, comfortable and beautiful room in which one could read, talk, be friendly, be happy. Valentine had rented the house unfurnished, and had furnished it deliciously with the assistance of Caroline Geean. Towards the end of January of the New Year she gave a housewarming party. She chose a Sunday evening for it. Dale was invited.

A few days before this party Dale had a telephone message from the theatre asking him to come round to the managers' room during the evening if he was free. He went and found Champion and Grant there. Champion was in evening clothes, Grant in a dark day suit with white slips to his waistcoat.

"Hulloh, Dale," said Champion, with a forced geniality. "Have a cigar? Sit down. There's the whisky at your elbow. Help yourself."

Dale sat down, accepted the cigar, refused the whisky.

"What is it? Anything about business?"

He looked from Grant to Champion.

"Is it dropping?"

"Oh, it always drops slightly about this time," said Grant. "But that's nothing. I give this play at least another six months—till the end of July."

"It's a certainty till then," added Champion.

"That's good—a run of nearly a year!"

"Damned good! But one has to look ahead these days. Are you doing anything now?" said Champion.

"Yes, I am working on something."

"You haven't made any arrangement yet? Of course you'll give us the first chance with it."

"It isn't finished. Nobody's seen it."

"Not Miss Morris?" said Champion.

"No, nobody."

"Well," said Grant, "we should like to have the first offer of it. I suppose we can count on that, eh?"

Dale hesitated, and was surprised by his own hesitation.

"You wouldn't go away from us, surely, after the opportunity we've given you here!" said Champion.

"What?"

"It isn't that."

"Then what is it? Somebody else is after your next?"

"Oh, I've had suggestions. I suppose that's usual after a success. But I'm perfectly free."

"Well then?" said Grant.

"Can we count on you giving us the first offer?" said Champion.

Dale still felt the unaccountable hesitation within him. And now he realised that it was connected with Valentine. He didn't want to make any promise, to arrange anything, till he had spoken to her.

"If the play I'm working on seems fitted for a big theatre——" he began, rather doubtfully.

But Champion broke in, with the ruthlessness habitual in him.

"Look here, Dale! Are you writing another big part for Miss Morris?"

"Yes. At least I'm trying to."

"And d'you mean to tell us she knows nothing about it?"

"She knows I'm working. But I've told her nothing. And I don't mean to till I've finished."

"But anyhow——" mean her to play the principal part?"

"If she will."

"It wouldn't do for Maud Eden?" said Grant casually.

"Rather not! I'm doing it for Miss Morris."

There was a silence. Dale broke it by saying:

"D'you mean that you don't want Miss Morris in your next production here?"

"We do and we don't," said Grant. "She's a great draw now, of course. And she's a damned good actress."

"But she plays the devil in the theatre," said Champion.

"I daresay she's difficult sometimes."

"Difficult!" said Champion. "My God! You'd think she was at the top of the world and we were a damned lot of pigmies peeping up at her from God knows where. The woman's a born bully. I always said so."

"Of course she knows her value now," said Dale, in a colourless voice.

"Knows her value!" said Champion. "She thinks we ought all to be on our knees thanking her for deigning to have set foot in this theatre."

"I really think you exaggerate," said Dale.

"You don't know. You've managed to get on the right side of her. I've never had to do with such a woman in my life. She's the limit."

"And so you don't intend to engage her again?"

"Well, I don't know," said Grant. "There's the fact that she's a big draw—at present."

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"Yes," said Champion. "At present."

"Why did you send for me to-night?" asked Dale.

"We've got to find a play for next autumn," said Grant.

"And we wanted to know whether you'd got one, and whether or no, if you had, you meant to make a point of having Miss Morris in it."

"That's it," said Champion.

"I see. Well, I hope to finish what I'm doing this Spring. And I shall certainly want to offer the leading part to Miss Morris."

"Right!" said Grant. "Now we know where we are."

At this moment Meyer slipped in.

"Excuse me, Mr. Grant, but could Mr. Arnstein see you for a minute?"

"Arnstein? Where is he?"

"I've shown him into the Garrick room."

"I'll come. Excuse me, Dale."

Grant went out. Champion had been standing up all this time, but now he sat down near Dale, after seeing that the door of the room was shut. He looked harassed and even, Dale thought, less stonily self-possessed than usual, and therefore more human. Dale and he had never become intimate. Not even the great success of Dale's play had drawn them together. But now there was a look in his dissipated eyes that suggested to Dale a desire on his part to get into a closer relation.

"Have a whisky, Dale!"

Dale looked again at Champion's eyes and accepted. His perpetual interest in the human species was roused into keen activity. The acceptance of the whisky which he didn't want might mean a step forward with Champion.

"This is an awfully good cigar," he said, with as much geniality as he could manage.

"I wanted to have a talk with you," said Champion.

He hesitated, looked even embarrassed, turned his cigar round and round, staring at it while he did so. Then he looked up at Dale furtively.

"We're in a success together, a big success," he said.

"Yes. I'm awfully glad of that."

"I don't know how you feel, but it seems to me a success is a friendly sort of thing, ought to draw folks together."

Dale wondered, but he didn't show his wonder. He wasn't

a hearty man, but he rejoined with all the heartiness he could muster :

" Why not ? You're right. Success ought to warm up the people in it."

" Just what I think. I've always liked you and believed in you, Dale. And now I've had a hand in helping you to success. Of course I know your success is my advantage. Still your play wasn't everybody's play, and I took the risk with it."

" Yes. And the risk with Miss Morris."

" Exactly—yes. And that was a bigger risk. But *she* doesn't seem to sense that. There's no more gratitude in that woman than there's gentleness in—in a viper."

" You know Mr. Champion——"

" Do drop the Mister !"

" Well, Champion, you know that I like Miss Morris."

" But you must see how difficult she is."

Dale was silent.

" Anyhow, difficult or not difficult," said Champion, in an unusually gentle voice, " I want to get on better terms with her."

" I'm sorry you——"

" It's like this. I want to be friendly with her, but she holds me off."

" Surely you're——"

" And my wife wants to be friendly too. We feel that in a way we discovered Miss Morris, gave her her chance. It seems odd if everybody's to be her friend but us. My wife feels badly about it. Of course that's strictly between you and me."

" Of course ! " said Dale, feeling very uncomfortable.

" I believe Miss Morris is giving a party next Sunday, isn't she ? " asked Champion, again turning his cigar round and round and staring at it.

" I believe she is—yes, she is."

" You're going, of course ? "

" Yes, I am."

" A housewarming, isn't it ? "

" Something like that, I suppose."

" Well, Dale, it'll seem damned odd if everybody's asked except my wife and I. You must see that."

" But what can I—but it isn't my party."

" I bet it isn't. I know you wouldn't leave us out. Look here, Dale, this is how it is. I don't care a damn about parties

and all the social rot. But women—well, you know how women feel about such things. My wife takes it badly to heart that we aren't asked for Sunday. After all, Miss Morris is making all her money in my theatre. I'm advertising her. I gave her her chance when she wasn't worth tuppence to the big public. Surely if she leaves us out people will talk and wonder. That's how my wife sees it."

"But what can I do?"

"Why you're a great chum of Miss Morris's. She thinks a damned lot of you. You might give her a hint about it. Of course without saying—Hullo, Grant! What's Arnstein want?"

"Well, I must be off," said Dale.

"And, look here, remember Grant and I want to have the first say about your new piece. That's only fair, Dale."

"It's awfully good of you——"

"Good be damned! It's business. Where can you find a management that'll do better for you than we can?"

"That's true."

"Then have we your word that you'll give us the first reading of your new piece?"

"Mr. Champion, can you see Mr. Daniel Shinkmann?" said Meyer at this juncture, popping in.

And while Champion began to swear, Dale said "Good-night," and went out.

That night, after the play was over, Dale had a few minutes with Valentine. She had changed rapidly, and was dressed to go to a supper party at Lady Manning's house in Arlington Street. He could only detain her for a very short time.

She was obviously restless, and gave him an impression of excitement and melancholy combined.

"What has Champion been saying to you?" she asked, lighting a cigarette. "Blount, just go and see whether Lady Manning's car has come for me yet, will you?"

"Yes, madam."

"How did you know Champion had said anything to me?"

"In a theatre like this one knows about everything. Is he after your new play?"

"Well——"

"You are not to promise it to him or to anyone till I've seen it. You are writing it for me, and I shall take it to the theatre it's best suited to. Don't promise anything."

"I haven't yet. But look here, Valentine, can't you be better friends with Champion?"

She stared at him.

"Friends—with Champion!"

"Yes."

"Friends with that man! If I were, how could I be friends with you, with Adelaide Sartoris, with Di Manning, with——" She stopped. "Dear Martin, I thought you were a man of discrimination."

"I only mean, why not be on decent terms with him?"

"I am. When I meet him I show my teeth to him and say: 'Fine day, Mr. Champion!'"

"But—I know I've no earthly right to interfere—but couldn't you ask him and his wife to your party on Sunday?"

"Martin, dear, when did you go mad? There were no premonitory symptoms. Your sanity seemed drastic. If there'd been a heat wave——"

"Now Valentine——" he took her hand. "Don't play the buffoon. Really, Champion and his wife will feel most awfully left out if you don't ask them."

"I hope so. If they didn't, I should feel my party was a failure."

"But after all Champion's given you——"

"Martin, I forbid you to feed me with bromides. I owe no more to Champion than he owes to me. And you know it. I'm good business. That's what I am to Champion. And he's got me dirt cheap at a hundred a week. His wife is a vulgar atrocity who makes him pay heavily for his persistent unfaithfulness to her. One woman like that would utterly destroy the atmosphere even of a party given in the Elysian Fields. You ask me to introduce a bouquet of garlic into my orchid house! Dear Martin, it's a pity, but you are mad, or"—she took him by the shoulders, and gazed into his eyes—"is this your idea of Christianity? If it is almost thou persuadest me to be an Atheist. Well, Blount, has it come?"

"Yes, madam, the car is there."

"Give me the gardenias Miss Geean sent to-night, will you?"

"They are here, madam."

"Smell them, Martin! No, dear, maniacs or Christians, or whatever we are, we can't live with garlic. If Champion's asked you, just tell him from me—No. How I love that word! For twenty-six years I said 'yes' and 'certainly.' But now!

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No, no, *no* ! Come along, Blount ! Go in front to protect me. Martin, for God's sake don't be soft."

She gave him one of her light kisses, that meant so little, and troubled him so much.

"My party's not going to be theatrical," she said. "It isn't the *Company* I'm entertaining on Sunday. Did you really think it was ?"

* * * * *

Remembering those words Dale was surprised when on the following Sunday night he walked into the long room at Wilton Crescent and found Mark Trever standing near the door with his hostess.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. SARTORIS had long ago described Valentine to Dale as "*une boîte de surprises*." That night, although he was familiar with many of her moods and had been startled by many outbursts on her part, she managed to produce new surprises for him from her apparently inexhaustible box. The relation of a man to a woman is more often than not what the woman chooses it shall be. Valentine had chosen to make of Dale a "chum." She treated him with a sometimes careless, sometimes affectionate familiarity which put sex in the background, evidently with intention. He was only some four years older than she was yet she often, ridiculously, called him "Uncle Martin," and she had taught little Brian, who was now at last with her sharing the glories of the new house, to give him that name. Dale smiled at the absurdity when the words came from her lips, and welcomed them from Brian's.

But he was acute enough to realise that in spite of his cosy intimacy with Valentine, shared so far as he knew by no other man, she was quite consciously and deliberately putting him, and keeping him, in a place that not he but she decided should be his. He was to be the comfortable, and absolutely harmless, friend, the confidante when she was in the mood for confidences, the "old shoe" of easy wearing,

almost the carpet slipper by the fireside. So she had decided with the somewhat ruthless determination characteristic of her. But Dale was neither sexless nor at all addicted by temperament to the pale habits of the tame cat. He didn't mind being "Uncle" to little Brian; but he secretly resented having Valentine as a self-elected niece. And though he liked receiving her confidences, and enjoyed his intimacy of mind with her, he knew that the man whom a woman of Valentine's type can be absolutely careless and at home with isn't the man who sexually attracts her. When he thought over the matter of his intimacy with Valentine he felt sure that she knew how strongly he was attracted by her sexually, and had chosen to turn him into an "Uncle" because she wasn't attracted sexually by him. The matter was plain to his discerning mind. Often it irritated and vexed him intensely. But hitherto he hadn't shown either irritation or vexation.

The sight of Mark Trever standing by Valentine in the long ground floor living-room in Wilton Crescent caused in Dale a thrill of surprise, but also a thrill of something else, more painful, uglier, deeper reaching. Valentine had of course once flatly told him that she loved Trever. When she had told him he had believed her. But since her growing success, and the complete change in her life brought about by it, she had never spoken intimately about Trever again; and Dale, never seeing him with her, never hearing her talk about him, and on the contrary finding her apparently engrossed by new interests and new friends, her existence flooded with the wonder of emancipation, had begun to hope that the turn of Fate was sweeping her away from an old fascination, which something within him estimated as a fascination of lust rather than of love, obstinate though it was.

And now Trever had been chosen out of the Company at the Central Theatre as the only one whom Valentine cared to have at her strictly non-theatrical housewarming! So Dale said to himself with an ugly shock of surprise and resentment. But he was mistaken. For within a few minutes Sir Eden and Lady Lisle came in and were warmly welcomed by Valentine. Sir Eden and Trever were the only representatives of the Company.

Even at that very early stage of her success she chose to mark her exclusiveness, that exclusiveness which caused the

un-included by her to attempt a poor revenge by the shrill out-cry, "Snob!" There were those who believed her exclusiveness to be "policy." Dale saw it in another light, saw her as the artist in life choosing, as a connoisseur chooses the exactly right picture for a certain room, the exactly right jewel to go with a certain gown, or even the exactly right wine to go with a particular dish.

No! The hall mark of the true artist.

But what about Mark Trever? Hadn't Valentine flung artistry over the mill by including him in the Wilton Crescent party?

Did Dale estimate the young actor wrongly, giving way to the deeply rooted prejudices of the male? He didn't know Trever well, though he had always been on terms that seemed thoroughly cordial with him. He didn't feel any inclination to know Trever well. Trever was admirable in his rôle in Dale's play. Even Dale, a short man who loathed being short, a sensitive man who secretly resented a great fact in Valentine's past, saw and acknowledged that Trever looked marvellously handsome on the stage, that he had exceptional physical grace and fascination, that he was even gifted. His immense popularity with the public was not wondered at by Dale.

But wasn't he really uninteresting? And wasn't he somehow common? Valentine had spoken of her orchid house. Mark Trever was surely no lover or understander of orchids.

It was amazing to Dale how she made herself at home among her guests. No man, he was certain, could ever have accomplished the feat she accomplished that night, the feat of being at ease among people in whose world she had never set foot but a few weeks before. The play had been produced in October. It was now January. Valentine's life had been spent in the English provinces, wandering from one town to another, associating with English provincial actors and actresses. She herself had told Dale so. She had been "dreadfully poor." Her experiences no doubt had often been sordid. She knew quite enough, perhaps far too much, of the seamy side of life. That she was not one of those legendary beings of innate purity, a snowdrop obstinately preserving its snowdrop qualities and virtues in the midst of coal dust and stinking mire, was sufficiently proved by the existence of Brian. Till now she had probably never had the

chance of mixing with people either brilliant, cultivated, or even well bred.

Where she came from, what her origin was, Dale didn't yet know. Perhaps he never would know. Although Valentine had often such an air of almost daredevil carelessness, although she often seemed to talk at random, evidently she knew what she didn't mean to say and took care not to say it. She had never told Dale what her "People" had been, and though he had heard of her mother, and knew her mother had brought little Brian to her in London, he had never met Mrs. Morris. The father apparently was either dead or had faded away from the family life. Dale knew very little of those facts which enable a man to "place" a woman. But something, mere instinct perhaps, or an unconscious observation and assembling of minute details, led him to believe, to feel practically sure, that Valentine was a remarkable creature the why of whom couldn't easily be found, couldn't perhaps be found at all among those from whom she had sprung. She had distinction, but he felt that it was entirely individual, not racial, not even connected with family, with forebears. She had a sort of innate cultivation, and that he felt to be a gift, an attribute of her great talent, rather than the result of education, of upbringing, of association. And she had the strange arrogance which he had noted so early in their acquaintance, an arrogance which seemed at times to stand in the place of ancestors, to emanate from a conscious aristocracy of the soul.

But he had never felt that Valentine, perhaps through caprice, perhaps urged by ungovernable talent, had been astray from her former surroundings, from those born akin to her, and was now happily returning to them. On the contrary he had felt that something perhaps cerebral in her, combined with certain gifts of intellect and nature, drew her towards the fastidious and the exclusive, and made her able not only to be on easy terms with them, but to fascinate and even to subdue them.

Nevertheless that night she astonished him.

Perhaps some sixty people had been invited and came to her house. Sir Eden Lisle and Trever were the only people belonging to *the* Profession, except of course Valentine herself. There were no dramatic critics, no newspaper men, no agents, no managers, no "producers," none of those people who are announced in the papers as "presenting" such and such

actors or actresses in such and such plays. None of the women who describe functions and gowns, who contribute "tittle tattle" to magazines filled with photographs of mothers and children, of tennis players, of racegoers, of dancers, of novel writing "explorers" were there. Even members of that peculiar breed called "regular first nighters" were not to be seen. In fact when, fairly late on in the evening, Dale examined the rooms for a moment with those terribly observant dark eyes of his, he murmured to his mind, "It's 'no' *in excelsis*!" Valentine's party seemed to him a fierce, and yet delicate assertion of No.

"The answer is in the negative." That ridiculous Parliamentary expression came almost upon Dale's lips as he looked and saw the people outside who hadn't been able to get in—Champion and Mrs. Champion among them.

Caroline Geean was there. And—why was that? Dale had the feeling that with her presence was connected a hidden concession on Valentine's part, a tacit refusal to 'no.' Mrs. Sartoris and her immensely tall, loosely aristocratic, husband were there. And there were some beauties, but not of the theatre; and there were some of those high-bred and exclusive women who manage—Heaven knows how!—to keep their names and their doings almost entirely out of the newspapers, and who realise that not to be chronicled is almost the only distinction left to importance in this Judgment Day of publicity. There were even women who had never allowed their photographs to be exposed at railway stations for the public, whom they didn't choose to know, to stare upon. And there were two or three Americans, dressed with quiet perfection and wearing few jewels, good looking, marvellous in line, the last word against blatancy. And there were girls, charming and self-possessed girls, who all seemed to know each other very well, who called each other by Christian or nick-names, and who mostly called Miss Morris "Valentine." But these girls were not all of them selected from the programme sellers at "Charity Matinées." And Lady Bremmish, who fought her way into every room which contained a celebrity, *wasn't* there; and Lady Leila Dearing, called by all suburbia "marvellous," and said to lead the "younger set," whatever that was, and universally spoken of as "Leila Dearing" by all those who didn't know her, *wasn't* there; and old Mr. Titus who hadn't been kept out of any important drawing-

room where well known people were assembled for the past forty years, *wasn't* there ; and even Mrs. Ditton Smiley who, for some unknown reason, was supposed to confer a peculiar importance upon any two or three gathered together whom she condescended to bore, *wasn't* there.

Valentine had been marvellously clever in the setting up of barriers.

There were a good many men, nearly as many, not quite, as women, and several of them were men of distinction who were scarcely ever seen in general society.

Lord Henry Savill, a remarkable theological intellect housed in a thin, bony body, was there to everyone's astonishment ; and that retiring Scottish genius, Alan Fife, and Broderick the mystical poet, who hated the theatre, and Rixby, the historian, and Mr. William Thor, pale, brilliant and condemnatory, whose beautifully written books were published privately at a couple of guineas the volume, and sold about six thousand copies a-piece, and "appreciated" in value as the weeks rolled by. Clarey Leath, the great satirist, was there bringing his square cut reddish grey beard, and his twinkling green grey eyes, and his courteous, wicked voice with him. And there was surely a new play in his gaze when his eyes rested, as they often did, on Valentine. And there were three or four guardsmen, young, fresh in dissipation, hilarious without being noisy, with touches of quicksilver in their veins to prove that Englishmen aren't all like the continental caricatures of them ; and there were young Americans, two of them from the American Embassy ; and there were three or four musicians, one of them a composer who scarcely ever "showed" in society, who looked nervous and sad and refined, and who was the possessor of more "orders" than perhaps any other musician ; and there were a few of those rich men who are not creative, not even very energetic, but who sincerely love the arts, and cultivate the acquaintance of the artists who are sincere, and who cannot be vulgar and merely acquisitive. (Such men as took Duse as their actress, Mrs. Meynell as their poetess, Vernon Lee as their essayist, and, in that time, were easily victims to Debussy.)

A big painter, intensely musical, too, was there, and another painter with a wife whom he publicly loved and could not cease from painting. And there was a woman pianist, supreme in Bach, with a strange profile, enticing in its irregularity

and suggestive of other irregularities. And there was a Roman Catholic Priest.

The Roman Catholic Priest was a Father Bexland, and, it seemed, he came from the Midlands and was an old friend of Valentine's who introduced Dale to him, with the added whisper, "I love this man." He knew nobody, it appeared, but Valentine introduced him to everybody, and he had in him a marvellous, powerful sincerity which put people wonderfully at their ease with him. He was middle-aged, of medium height, rather broad and burly in figure, with a handsome, still face and beautiful hazel eyes, kind, earnest and full of will. He had never seen Valentine act and probably never would.

"I don't think of her as an actress," he said to Dale. "I think of her as something more universal than that."

Dale wondered if he knew about Brian. Dale wondered about many things that night.

Valentine's ease was not that of a woman determined to hold her own among others, and holding it by sheer power of will and obstinacy of intention. No ; it was rather the ease of one plunged in an atmosphere that suited her, that she delighted in, that was bringing her mental, perhaps even spiritual health. Some of the pretty girls seemed almost to worship her. She had not to make up to them ; they made up to her. Dale saw at once that she was a success, a great success with the women. And he fancied that she cared more about that than about being a success with the men. She took a charming amount of trouble with the women. And Dale realised that on the stage she was going to be even more the women's actress than the men's. And that, as he knew, spells success of money.

Everything was very well done, but without ostentation. The flowers were lovely. Dale was sure Caroline Geean had made herself responsible for them. There was no entertainment. People just talked and there was supper ; and after supper they talked with even greater animation. And Dale enjoyed himself a good deal. But he wondered.

He wondered at Valentine's great social qualities, suddenly and definitely shown to him. He had known she must have them, because of the unnumerable people who had "taken her up" after the success of the first night, and who hadn't dropped her. But now he saw them displayed. She had an innate instinct for the best, and evidently the best welcomed

her, found her piquant, interesting, easy. The hideous social struggle that convulsed, and would for ever convulse Lady Bremmish, however high her climb, that would indeed render her epileptic even upon the pointed peaks, was non-existent in Valentine. That evening Dale found in her a distinction of personality that seemed part of her talent, a quiet "I am I" that had no immodesty, no "push," but that somehow had authority. He wondered.

And he wondered about Miss Geean. And he wondered about Mark Trever. And he wondered about Father Bexland, and again about Mark Trever. And he wondered how many of those whom he saw and heard all about him knew that Brian hadn't a father who was any good as a father. Some of them, quite a good many of them would, he felt sure, accept the presence in the house of an illegitimate child with smiling equanimity. But there were some who—he looked at the charming American women, orchids indeed—how would they take the definite assertion of Valentine: "I'm the mother of a boy born out of marriage. He's here in the house. If you come to lunch you'll meet him. But he's too young to sit up as late as this"? And there were certain English women there who would surely be surprised. Unless they knew! Had Valentine explained through the telephone when she talked the invitation in her charming, so characteristic voice? She wouldn't hide it. Dale was certain of that. But had she thought it necessary to explain it? Probably not.

That sense of Valentine having made an unavowed concession in inviting Caroline Geean that night clung obstinately to Dale. The Champions had been resolutely kept out. Miss Geean had been let in. That was how he couldn't help feeling it. But the Champions were quite unmistakably—garlic. And Miss Geean quite unmistakably wasn't garlic. She was evidently immensely rich. She was charming, had something remarkable about her, had extraordinary taste in dress, in the arrangement of a house, of a garden, knew—none better—how to choose the exactly right furniture for a room, had a *flair* for colour, for design, loved good pictures, and possessed of them many, was *persona gratissima* at Christie's, was surrounded in her life by all the right things, by the most delicate perfection of luxury.

And yet——?

What was it? Dale's instinct persisted, the instinct that

told him Valentine wouldn't have asked Miss Geean to this particular gathering if she hadn't either been very fond of her, or hadn't been very grateful to her, so grateful that she wanted to please Miss Geean and was ready to make a little sacrifice for that. Which of us hasn't friends who don't "go" with our acquaintances? Miss Geean was by this time Valentine's friend. Did she "go"?

Dale saw her talking to the Lisles a good deal. And he saw Mr. William Thor talking a great deal to her, waving his short fingered ghost-like hands and fluttering his ghost-like eyelids, and tenderly stroking, not pulling, his primrose-coloured ghost-like moustache. She talked, too, to Father Bexland, and to several other people. But Dale never saw her with the American orchids. Valentine introduced her to Mrs. Sartoris, but, Dale remarked, their conversation was brief. He talked to Miss Geean and found her, as he had always found her, quiet, serene, self-possessed and imperturbable—also enigmatic. But he couldn't banish an impression that though in the company she was not of the company. Valentine strangely was of it, as well as of course in it.

As to Mark Trever—he was the surprise of the party, and that very fact, in such a party, effortless, careless almost, intimate and cleverly, very cleverly, any one seemed to give to him, Dale thought, just a *soupçon* of vulgarity. People were surprised to find him, and pleased, even some of them excited in their surprise. It was like the travelling conjuror appearing unexpectedly in the market place. Good gracious! The guardsmen and the young diplomats did not exactly stand afar off, but they didn't seem exactly to "cotton" to Trever. Nevertheless they eyed his athletic proportions with understanding. He was obviously an out-of-doors man as well as an actor. The pretty girls were interested in him and showed it. He was the *beau male* of the London stage. His evening was passed mainly with the pretty girls. But he talked also to the Lisles, and once Dale saw him giving a glass of champagne to Miss Geean. Somehow he stood out from his surroundings, didn't blend with them, and that wasn't because of his striking good looks, his athletic grace. No; it was because he looked like a performer. Dale thought of a sleek and handsome circus horse introduced unexpectedly into a stable of thoroughbreds.

But he was quite a success. The odd thing was that even

his success seemed to introduce a false note into the otherwise cleverly harmonised evening.

Valentine seemed to take little notice of him. But she introduced him to most of her guests. She played hostess well without seeming to play any part.

When it was getting late and some people had gone she murmured to Dale, in passing him.

"Stay last, Uncle Martin!"

CHAPTER XVII

IT was past one o'clock on Sunday night, or Monday morning, when Dale outstayed Mark Trever in Wilton Crescent. Evidently the actor must have read in Dale's eyes an implacable decision. And possibly he was sufficiently subtle to suspect that it was secretly encouraged by Valentine. But he showed nothing except smiling good nature and bonhomie as he at last said,

"Well, I must be off, Miss Morris, though you and I, being in the profession, can't call this late."

He took her hand with a sort of manly frankness and gripped it.

"This has been one of the best evenings I remember. Just the sort of quiet cultivated beano I enjoy and get too seldom. So much more in it than in all those night club affairs and restaurant suppers that we have to put up with as a rule. As to your house—" he looked round, almost dramatically—"it's a peach. You've got taste."

"Think so?" dropped casually from Valentine's lips.

"Of course I do," said Trever, with male intensity. "And as to your friends one would have to go a long way to meet more delightful people. You're in luck."

The last words came from him with an intonation that suggested surprise, not too carefully hidden. He paused, and seemed about to say something else, looked at Dale and said nothing.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Valentine said, still casually.

"Good-night."

"Good-night—Miss Morris. Ever so many thanks for

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asking me. Good-night, Mr. Dale. This play of yours is going to run for ever."

"And that's partly your fault!" said Dale.

Trever got away on a laugh.

When the door shut behind him Valentine stood and looked at it. After a moment, during which she seemed to be listening intently, she said:

"He's gone. D'you want anything more, Uncle Martin?"

"No, Aunt Valentine, unless I may smoke a last cigar."

"Smoke it, my dear."

As Dale pulled out his cigar case and began to prepare things she stood where she was, glancing about the long room, with its golden brown walls, and its many bookcases unprotected by glass, and its Epstein bust of a Café Royal girl, and its deep sofas and arm-chairs of Spring sky blue and daffodil yellow, and its perfect copy of Titian's "Salome," and the other copy of the portrait by Ingres of the painter Granet, with the cloak and the book and the sideways looking eyes, and the long Steinway grand piano, and the long windows covered with Spring green curtains. On the open hearth a log fire was still smouldering, and a Pekingese slept on an old gold cushion. And in the still air there lingered the faintest suspicion of the scent of amber.

And Valentine wore a dress the colour of silver with a silver sheen on it.

As Dale threw his match into the log fire Valentine said,

"I shall never give a perfect party."

"Why?" Dale asked.

"Because I'm a fool. Because I'm a woman with a touch of genius in me but a twist—a moral twist, I suppose you'd call it. Or is it a twist of the brain, something wrong with my grey matter? In those awful theatrical lodgings, in the homes from home that I've had nightmares in for years, I've dreamed of my perfect party. And now—" she spread out her long arms—"I have this, all this, and I know wonderful people, and I give my party, and—and I ask a false note! Because I must! Because I must! And I know it's a false note, because my brain is good and I have a marvellous natural sense and feeling for harmony. There's an art of the stage, and I understand it, subtly, my dear, subtly. And there's an art of life and I understand that subtly too. But I have to bring in the false note. Oh, Uncle Martin!"

She sat down swiftly in a big arm-chair near the smouldering logs, and looked into the fire, and moved her head two or three times slowly as if in sad condemnation. And suddenly she looked tired and even—yes, it was incredible, but yes!—and even old. That was possible because her beauty was of the haggard type and probably had never had any English freshness.

"But which was the false note?" said Dale, sitting near her.

She turned sharply.

"You humbug! Oh, what a humbug you are!"

Dale smoked with apparently equanimity.

"They say I'm a snob. But I'm not. I'm only a chooser, a selector, as every artist must be. But you are a humbug."

"Why not? Who isn't?"

"I'm not. The false note was Mark Trever. Oh, what a false note he was!"

Dale was silent.

"Didn't you know I meant him? Didn't you? But who else——"

She stopped. And they looked at each other by the fire through the pale mounting smoke of his cigar.

"Carrie!" she then said, defiantly. "You thought I——"

"Don't leap to conclusions!"

"Carrie in certain ways is marvellously cultivated."

"I'm sure she is."

"What do you know about——"

"Absolutely nothing."

"And about him—Mark—so much, everything that matters between us."

"Why did you ask him?"

"Oh, for such a simple reason! Because he wanted to come. And directly I knew he wanted, badly, I had to ask him. And he stood out, like a boil on a smooth, satiny skin."

Again she was silent, and Dale said nothing.

"And I didn't. I was at home in it all, marvellously at home. And yet I've never had a house of my own before, never a pretty room like this. And I've always lived among dreadful people. But you see I was *meant* for all this and he wasn't. And yet when he wants to come I have to ask him."

There was a dreadful, hopeless sound in her voice. And the colour of it seemed to grow darker. After a moment she said:

"Isn't it awful? Since I'm a success he's beginning to want me again."

"Yes, that is awful. But it's terrifically human."

"He's become interested in me again, not at all because I am what I am but *only* because he sees the impression I make on others. He can't see and feel the interestingness of me unless he sees others, many others, seeing and feeling it. That's the measure of what he is. You are so different. You saw, you felt, through Champion's jeering and doubt, through Grant's horrible preoccupation about Dan Shinkmann. You were ready to pay me seventy pounds a week out of your own pocket because you saw so clearly. But he has to be shown—by others. And now they have shown him and so——"

She broke off, bent down, picked up the dreaming Pekingese from his gold coloured cushion and put him on her knees. And with her long hands she stroked his soft coat gently as she went on speaking, earnestly, as if explaining things partly to herself.

"If I were what I am, but dragging about the Provinces, only able to receive people in back streets of towns like Preston, Wigan, Leeds, he would think I had nothing in me. Nothing in me just because I couldn't get into London and so had to act in Preston! He has a mind like that. Really he has. And I have known it for nearly eight years, or quite. And yet I ask him here to-night! D'you remember once saying to me, 'No, I don't suppose you are,' when I had said that I wasn't generally lucky?"

"I remember."

"What made you say that? You stared at me, and then you said that, and Adelaide Sartoris was embarrassed."

"I had a feeling that you might sometimes be your own enemy."

"You are clever. You are very clever. And he is just a common man with gifts and physical graces. And you understand me wonderfully and he doesn't understand me at all, and doesn't even want to understand me. And you care for me, with your mind too, because you have a mind that can care, and he doesn't. He's the sort of man who cares for a woman when she's well-dressed, and doesn't care for her when she's got an unbecoming or old-fashioned gown on. And I can talk to you and I can't talk to him, not really talk. Your cleverness makes me feel how clever I am. And his

stupidity makes me feel humiliated, as if I were the stupid one. And I'm awfully fond of you—but I love him."

"I'm not sure of that."

She stopped stroking the tiny lion-like toy that was blinking at the fire.

"But I have told you!"

"And I have told you—I'm not sure of that."

"You think you know more about a woman's love than she knows herself?"

"Could love analyse so cruelly as you do?"

"But I am clear brained. I've got brains. Haven't you found that out?"

"Oh, yes."

"Apart from acting I'm clever."

"I know you are. But I don't think love often sees with such cruel clearness as you do. A boil on a satiny skin!"

"But he *was*!"

"Even the man you love might well be afraid of you."

"He isn't afraid. He's too stupid to be afraid."

"I don't think Trever is stupid."

"He is. He is a stupid, gifted man with beauty, if a man may have beauty."

"Valentine, are you sure it isn't lust you feel, not love?"

"What is lust? Isn't it very often the love of beauty? Mustn't an artist love beauty? Think of bandy legs! Could I love a man of genius who had bandy legs?"

He saw in her big nut-brown eyes what he called "the buffoon look." Irresponsible laughter seemed brimming in them for an instant.

"I might love the thing unseen—yes. But I must be able to love the thing seen too."

"But if the unseen thing has bandy legs and your mind sees them?"

"You're clever, Uncle Martin. But it isn't the same thing. Body is nearer to body than soul is near to soul, or even mind to mind."

"It would be easy to deny that and to give good reasons for the denial."

He got up, suddenly remembered how short he was and sat down again.

"Why did you do that?" she said.

Dale reddened.

"Never mind!" he said. "Even you must not know everything."

"He saw me once in Preston," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. When 'The Island of Dreams' was over I got a small part in a travelling company. We did a melodrama called 'The Man with the Blue Face.' And I was in it. Just imagine!"

Dale tried to, but nearly failed.

"He came down. He thought he was in love with me then. But when he saw my lodgings in Preston, and the part I had, and how I wasn't considered by anybody—by any of the awful bounders I was with, he felt that it was ridiculous and unsuitable for him to be in love with me. And so he wasn't! Isn't it strange that a human being can be like that? A shark is strange. But a human being like that is stranger still, I think. But now I play the principal part at the Central Theatre and I have this house, and wonderful people come to it, and Champion can't get in. And so *he* wants to love me again."

"Will you let him?"

Suddenly she turned the toy off her knees.

"I don't want to, and I do—I do! Oh, Uncle Martin!"

He came close to her. She put her hands on his shoulders and began to sob, desperately.

He realised how terrible it was for a man, not old, and ardent, to be trusted so much by a woman.

CHAPTER XVIII

DALE had finished his new play. It had taken him longer than he had anticipated. When he put the last touches to it May was drawing to an end and London was crowded, with Londoners, visitors from the country and travellers from everywhere. His play at the Central Theatre was still drawing good houses, but Champion and Grant were doubtful about the possibility of carrying the run beyond the end of July. They had acquired

two plays, one of which might do for the autumn season. But they were obviously anxious to know what Dale had done before deciding on anything, obviously impatient and irritated by his evasiveness whenever they tried to pin him down to a firm promise about his next play. They couldn't get him to say that they should have the first look at it. Yet they hadn't been able to bring themselves to offer him money down and a contract for it before seeing it.

"And even if we did I don't believe the fellow would sign," said Champion. "Fact is Morris has got him—" he lifted a big hand and held it in the air with the fingers tightened till they resembled claws—"like that. He daren't do a thing till she gives him permission. It's she has the say. He'll take it to any theatre she chooses. And she's no more gratitude in her than a rattlesnake has. Damn the day when we first set eyes on that woman."

"Look at the money we've made with her, Jack."

"And look at the trouble we've had! All the trouble in theatres comes from the women. There's no man living that can play the bully as a woman can. My God, I should be thankful to see the last of Morris, or—" he paused, and assumed his face of stone—"or to get even with her."

Grant gently sucked his false teeth.

"See any way of getting even with Miss Morris?" he asked after a moment.

"Well, one would be to get hold of Dale's play and put another woman in the lead, Maud Eden, for instance."

"Maud Eden couldn't play a part written for Miss Morris."

"Couldn't she? She could play any part."

Grant, who knew all about Champion's present relations with Miss Eden, simply lifted his eyebrows and stared.

"My wife thinks Morris is only a flash in the pan," continued Champion. "And I know lots that think like her."

"Ah! And what do you think?"

Grant had turned in his chair, and now he fixed his plaintive dark eyes on his partner. Champion didn't return his gaze. He looked away, twisted his big lips and finally said:

"Tell the truth, Lez, I hate the woman so much that——"

"Well?"

"She can act. I'll allow that. But——"

"D'you want to get her out of the theatre?"

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"She's played the devil with me. She's been damned rude to my wife. She's the Queen of Snobs. I should like to down her."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because the public's for her."

"The public'll forget anyone in a week these days."

"Don't you believe it. It's the old women they've got short memories for, not the women under thirty. If we miss Dale's play and let Miss Morris leave our management d'you know what's going to happen?"

"Whatever d'you mean?" said Champion, suddenly looking coarsely alert.

"She'll go into management with Trever and take Dale's play with her."

Champion opened his big mouth, and all his features seemed suddenly to thicken, to swell.

"And who'll back her?" he said.

"Who'll back her? Carrie Geean."

"Carrie Geean! How d'you know that? Anyone told you?"

"Not a word. You just wait and you'll see I'm right."

"Wait!" said Champion, with sudden savagery. "And perhaps you'll tell me where you get by waiting. I started without a cent. Now I'm in Park Lane. Think I got there by waiting?"

"Then do the other thing. Tie Dale down to us and if his play's any good Morris'll have to stay with us."

"That's easily said."

"Well, you've got to Park Lane from nowhere," said Grant who lived in St. John's Wood. "So you're the man to do it."

Champion frowned. He had a habit of drawing his brows together when he was thinking hard, and then lumps appeared between his tufted eyebrows and his eyes almost disappeared. He sat quite still for perhaps three minutes and kept silence. Then he straightened his forehead and said:

"Dale wouldn't care about her going into management with Trever, Lez."

Grant smiled faintly.

"Think not?"

"Does he know?"

"Know what?"

"That's she's thinking of it?"

"How could he? She doesn't know herself."

"What the devil d'you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Then who does know?"

"Who does? The man who's busy putting the idea to her without seeming to."

"Trever?"

"Who else?"

Champion made as if to whistle but no sound came from his pursed lips.

"You're no fool, Lez," he said at last. "At times you look like a damned highbrow with that intellectual stare of yours. But you weren't born in a pot of grease paint for nothing. You've put me wise."

"Then let's have a drink!"

"Right ho!"

On the following morning just after twelve Champion went into his Gordon Hotel sort of library in Park Lane and got on to Dale at the telephone.

"Lunching anywhere to-day, Dale? . . . Well then can you come to lunch with me at Ciro's? I want to have a word with you. . . . Right! One o'clock sharp. . . . Oh, yes, good house last night. The return was something like four hundred and thirty pounds. . . . Yes, damned good for a hot Wednesday night. . . . Still we've got to think of the autumn. . . . Ciro's one o'clock sharp. Only you and me."

As he turned away from the telephone the door opened and Mrs. Champion came in, dressed in flame colour with a black hat, large rubies in her ears, only the lobes of which showed beneath her copper-coloured hair, and a touch of orange paint on either cheek. She was a Jewess, who had long ago been converted to the Roman Catholic Church because she thought the Oratory and Farm Street "drew" a more select crowd than the Synagogue. At this time she was not far from fifty though she still wrote herself down in passports as thirty-eight. Her look and manner to a discerning eye and mind suggested rose-pink powder masking vitriol. She had a desperate smile and a furtive pair of black eyes. Being perpetually betrayed had gradually changed her from an ordinary sort of woman into a seething pool of bitterness.

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"At the telephone again!" she said, with a flare of suspicion. "You live at the telephone. I wonder you don't get tired always holding that thing against your ear!"

"Well, don't you use it? I had to get on to Dale."

"Poor Mr. Dale!" said Mrs. Champion, with embittered pity.

"What's the matter with Dale?"

"The matter? He's a slave to that awful woman."

"Rot! Dale's got a will of his own."

"Has he? I know better. Just you try to get his new play for the Central without asking the Morris's permission first and see if he has."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do to-day at Ciro's," said Champion, who was deliberately unguarded with his wife about as many things as possible in order to stave off suspicion when he really wished to hide something.

Mrs. Champion, who had once been told by a man that she was "deliciously bird-like," put her head on one side and tried to make robin's eyes.

"*Et après?*" she said, with an English accent.

"What's that?"

"You'll waste your lunch, unless you promise to take that woman with the play. Ah! That's what you're going to do. I knew it!"

"Knew what? What the devil are you after?"

"I knew you wanted to keep that woman in the theatre! A woman who's insulted me, who won't have me in her house, who's laughed at you and trampled over you in your own theatre, who calls you Caliban——"

"What's that?"

"She does. Her name for you is *Caliban*, Shakespeare's monster out of 'As You Like It'."

"My God! So Caliban's got into 'As You Like It' now!"

"She does. And she's not even decent enough to hide her shame. She parades her bastard son all over London with her. A woman like that gives a theatre a bad name. Since she's been there I've heard people say the Central's nothing better than a brothel."

"Chuck it!"

"They do!"

"Let them!"

"A woman actually glorying in having a bastard! I

wouldn't go into her house now if she asked me. And all my friends say the same."

"She won't ask you so don't you worry."

"She wouldn't dare. She knows I'm a straight woman."

"Well, go on being a straight woman and leave her alone!"

"So you stand up for her, a woman who didn't even ask us to——"

"Oh, chuck that! If I've heard it once I've heard it a thousand times."

"You're no better than Dale. She's got you same as she has Dale. Just because she's a bully you must all fall in love with her."

"Who says I'm in love with Val Morris?"

"I do. And she calls you Caliban. That's her name for you—Shakespeare's monster out of——"

"I know. Out of 'Hamlet'."

"It doesn't matter what it's *out* of. The point is——"

At this moment the door of the library was opened and a very tall footman said:

"The Rolls is at the door, ma'am."

"I'm coming."

Mrs. Champion began to pull on a very long white suede glove.

"You talk against Morris," she said, "but that's all meant to be a blind. You're really mad about her. And the more she insults and bullies you the more you think of her. She rules the theatre. Everyone in London knows it. Everyone in London——"

"Get away! Get out of it! I'm sick of your damned nonsense!"

"You've got the mania of persecution! That's what you've got. And the more she——"

"If you don't shut your mug you'll soon know what persecution is," said Champion, with sudden savagery. "Enough of it, I tell you!"

Mrs. Champion's heavily painted lips trembled.

"If you keep on Morris in another play after the way she's treated us, the whole of London'll despise you," she said. "A woman who calls you Caliban! Shakespeare's——"

Champion made a sudden movement. Mrs. Champion twisted her face into a grotesque expression of irony and went out quickly. She was terribly thin with small pointed

shoulders. Her copper-coloured hair was bobbed. (Shingling hadn't yet come into fashion.) She looked almost like a made-up skeleton running away.

When she had gone Champion stood for a while with his hands in his trousers pockets, staring grimly about his big room, at the deep red leather arm-chairs, the tantalus on the oak cabinet, the collection of caricatures by Sem, the beetle green paper decorated with sunflowers in gold, the signed photographs of actors and actresses, mostly in silver frames, the "Theatrical library" as he called it, books about actors and actresses, about plays and the stage, behind glass, at the bronze statuettes of nude women in provocative attitudes which his wife detested and called "salacious—if you know what I mean!" Evidently an unusual thing had happened; evidently his wife's remarks had given him food for thought. A buhl clock struck on his ormolu writing-table near a gold inkstand. He heaved up his broad shoulders, gave vent to a heavy long sigh, went into the hall, put on a "derby" hat, took up a pair of thick white gloves and a gold-headed bamboo cane, opened the front door, shut it with a bang, and set off down Park Lane in the direction of Piccadilly.

When he reached Orange Street, and had turned in at Ciro's, where he found two or three, terribly smart and marvellously thin, painted girls seated in the hall waiting with fatal expressions, he went downstairs into the clever bar by the grill room, sat down on a high stool, munched some salted almonds, drank a couple of dry martinis, and talked to two or three Jews, to an American film magnate, and to an English male dancer. Then he went upstairs and found Dale giving his hat and stick to an attendant in livery.

"Halloh, Dale! Up to time! Have a cocktail?"

"No, thanks."

"Then let's go in to lunch."

He led the way to a yellow sofa at the far end of the restaurant facing the entrance.

"We'll be cosy here!"

They sat down side by side with a table in front of them and a mirror behind them.

"Halloh, Jack! Business good?" said a thin man, with a look of false youth and a death's-head, who was dressed in black and white check with a black stock and an eyeglass.

"Ai! How's yours?"

"Booming!"

"Halloh, Maud. Golf going well?"

"Rather! Round in eighty-four last time I was at Woodcote Park," said a lovely and cheeky looking girl in a tobacco brown dress and a bright red hat, who was sitting close by with a small man who had a bald head and a face like a teapot.

"You know Mr. Dale, don't you? Dale—Miss Eden."

Maud Eden bowed with sudden hauteur. Dale returned the bow with polite energy.

"Now let's see!" said Champion, taking a large menu card from a smiling Italian waiter.

When they were eating *bœuf à la mode* with deliciously sweet little carrots, and had talked about various topics of the day, Champion said in a low voice:

"What d'you think of this new idea of Miss Morris's, Dale? Think it'd be a good move?"

A sudden intensity came into Dale's dark eyes.

"What new idea?" he asked. "I haven't heard of anything special."

"Mean to say she hasn't told you? I thought she went to you with everything."

"Miss Morris and I are very good friends, but that's no reason why she should bother to tell me everything in her life."

"Have some more of these carrots. They're damned good. I'll bet she's told you a lot."

Dale said nothing.

"D'you know what they're saying? They're saying Lord Bartlett's the father of her youngster."

"Really!"

"I don't believe it."

"But what about this new idea, as you call it?"

"Well, it's all over London"—Champion fixed his shrewd pocketed eyes on Dale—"that Miss Morris is going into management with Trever, and that Carrie Geean's promised to back them."

Although Dale had gradually acquired the aimed-at power of controlling his expression in moments of difficulty and shock, Champion noticed a fleeting movement of his features which was like a facial start.

"Funny!" he said. "I hadn't heard of it."

"Well, you can take my word for it that it's in the air," said Champion. "But of course before anything's settled they're bound to come to you."

"Why?"

"Why, because they'll be after your new piece to open with. You can't start in management without a trump up your sleeve. I will say for you that you're a good winner. You don't spread yourself. Same time you must know that Miss Morris wouldn't take a step like this unless she expected you to back her up in it. Of course she's banking on getting your play."

"She's never given me a hint of this," said Dale.

"Well, she'll give you more than a hint when things have gone a bit further. You can take that from me."

After a rather long silence Dale said:

"If what you say is true about her going into management, Miss Morris may have acquired another play."

Champion realised that the time had arrived for a clinching lie.

"I happen to know that she hasn't," he said. "My boy, she's banking on you. You found her out. You made her. And she's depending on you to hoist her another step up, and Trever with her. What'll you have now?"

"Oh, nothing more, thank you."

"But you must. Have some sweets?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, have some cheese! Waiter——"

"No, really."

"Anyhow, have a peach, and a liqueur and some coffee."

"A peach, then, thanks."

"And they've some old brandy here that you can't beat in London. Waiter——!"

The old brandy was really remarkable and Champion persuaded Dale, usually a very moderate man, to repeat his first dose of it, and to smoke a Corona. His object, the prolongation of their interview, was achieved, and presently, scenting the psychological moment, he became more explicit.

"I like to put all my cards on the table, boy," he said. "Whenever it's possible. With you I feel I can do it because you're a gentleman. When I heard this rumour—and mind you it's a rumour of truth—I made up my mind to come out into the open with you. I'm acting on my own in this. Grant don't know I'm doing it. What I think is this. We helped you to success. Can't deny that, can you?"

"I don't deny it. You took my play. You gave me a splendid cast and production."

"We did our best by you, boy. And we naturally thought you'd stay friendly with us. We believe in your talent. We think you're bound to do great things. And we think, both of us, that the big success we've all had is mainly owing to you. Well now, Miss Morris don't agree with that. She figures that pretty near all the success is owing to *her*. She's a fine actress. I don't run her down. But both Grant and I uphold that it's the play that's made her, not her that's made the play. This brandy's damned good, isn't it?"

"Excellent!"

"Like velvet, isn't it?"

"It really is."

"Thinking as we do we should feel it very much if we didn't get your next piece. Why should Miss Morris and Trever thieve it away from us? We'll let them go. They don't matter to us once this run's over. But we don't want to lose *you*, Dale. We don't think that would be fair, really we don't. We both have a feeling for you we haven't got for them not by a long way. Now all we ask is this. Give us the first offer of your next one. We're ready even to act in the dark. We're ready to put down money to secure an option! Now what d'you say? Miss Morris hasn't played very fair, getting up all this behind our backs. But she thinks she's made now. So she don't care a damn about us. And she's already saying your new piece is hers, and she can take it wherever she likes. And that hurts us, boy. It does. We feel, Grant and I, we ought to have a fair chance to get the play. If we do get it we're perfectly willing to engage Miss Morris for the principal part in spite of all this underground work. If you say she's to be in it, why she ~~shall~~ be in it. But why in thunder should Trever have it? That's what knocks us. We can't see the justice of that."

"No more can I!" said Dale.

"Trever's a good actor, and there's no denying it, he's a ~~big~~ draw with the women. He's an asset to any theatre. Miss Morris knows that. She's a damned good business woman. ~~Look~~ at the way she played us up with the contract before ever she was worth tuppence in any theatre. She's been spending big money, and no doubt she figures that in management with Trever backed by Carrie Geean's dollars she could get away with more than any salary could bring her. I'm a business man myself and I can't blame her for that. Same

time there is such a thing as fairness even in business, and we can't see why we should be knocked right out of the road by a woman we've helped to make what she is. We want your play——" He glanced at Dale's cheeks which were slightly flushed, at his eyes which were shining—"We want it because we believe in you. We should be willing to take it without Miss Morris. We should be willing to take it with her, if you say so. It's for you to have the say this time. You're not the man you were. You've got a big name now. Any cast you want you can have. We'll do our best by you. But we want you to understand that Grant and I put you before Miss Morris. She thinks she's God Almighty. But we put the man who makes the play before the player. She, like all women, puts herself first. According to her when she's passing the post all the rest are just coming to Tattenham Corner. And you're mixed up with the bunch. Now this is our offer to you. We'll pay you any reasonable sum to have the option on your new play. And if we take it, as of course we shall if we get the chance, we'll offer the lead to Miss Morris if you say so, with a salary of, say, about double what she gets now. Now isn't that square dealing? Have just a spot more?"

"No thanks—really!"

"Just a spot! Is the play near finished?"

"I've just finished it."

"You have! That's great news! We want to get ahead for the autumn. We've got two plays. But we'd rather give yours the first chance. Now what do you say? Is it ever to have it or us?"

Dale sat back on the yellow sofa. His mind, which was generally clear, felt oddly confused. He knew by experience that Champion was clever in business; he had no reason to think that Champion was exceptionally scrupulous. Nevertheless, Champion had made a considerable impression upon him. It happened that for some time Dale had realised, and had secretly revolted against, Valentine's empire over him. He was in love with her. That was certain. He hadn't told her so. But she knew it. And she used her power over him with a sort of friendly carelessness which was beginning to get on the nerves of the lover in Dale. By nature he was not a weak man. In consequence of that, whenever he was weak he was apt to be disgusted with himself. He was disgusted with himself now. Champion's assertion about the managerial

intentions of Valentine had given him a shock. The idea of handing over his new play to Trever—for if Valentine went into management with Trever, surely Trever would call the tune—revolted him. But was what Champion had asserted true? Could it be true?

He turned on the sofa and looked at Champion.

"Are you sure Miss Morris is thinking of management?"

"Positive. Grant knows it too. That's why Miss Morris is so thick with Carrie Geean. She needs a backer. I even know which theatre they're after."

"Which is it?"

"The London Playhouse. That holds over three hundred, and it's to be had by anyone who can put up enough money."

A strong sense of injury was growing in Dale. He sat looking sullen and staring before him at the now nearly empty restaurant.

"Of course, if you've pledged yourself to give your new play to Miss Morris I'll say nothing more," said Champion.

"A promise is a promise. You don't need to sign."

"I've promised nothing."

"Well then, boy, can't you give us the first chance? We'll offer the lead to Miss Morris if you say so."

Again Dale looked at Champion. At that moment there flashed through his mind the question: "Is it my play Champion wants, or is it Valentine?" But surely it couldn't be Valentine. And yet—Dale remembered the curious scene in the managers'-room after the straight run through which Valentine had demanded before the play at the Central was produced. On that one occasion he had seen Champion shaken. Valentine had shaken him.

"Or we'll engage any other actress you say. It's the play we're after. And if we get it, and you say you want Averil Mulholland, or anyone else for the part, why, Miss Morris can go hang, and Trever with her. I may as well tell you, as we're talking man to man, that Trever's been the prime mover in the whole thing."

"I'll let you and Grant have the first chance with my play," said Dale.

"That's a promise. Shake, boy!"

And then they got up to go.

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER his interview with Champion, Dale wasn't quite happy about what had happened. He realised that he had been driven into defiance by the astute manager, that his defiance hadn't come about naturally, hadn't sprung as it were spontaneously out of his own masculine character. Champion had had to prod him into it. And now he wasn't at his ease in it, though of course he was going to keep his promise.

But what would Valentine say? How would she take this break through on his part? For it was just that, a break through into the beyond that lay outside the circle of her influence. His uneasiness gave him the exact measure of his former submission to the woman whose good fortune he had brought about. For a long while now he had been far too subservient. Perhaps it was a good thing for him that at last he had been goaded into an assertion of his independence.

When he was again in his house he took a typed copy of his now finished play out of his writing table drawer, and, without looking into it, wrapped it up in brown paper, tied it with string, sealed and addressed it, rang for a boy messenger, and dispatched it to the Central Theatre.

He hadn't written that play to hand it over to Trever. Certainly he had written it for Valentine, but not for a woman who was in the hands of a fellow such as Trever was. But was she so entirely in his hands?

He wasn't certain that Champion had told him the exact truth. But he did feel that there must be some truth in what Champion had said. And if there was some truth in it, then Valentine hadn't surely been very honest with him.

His secret and invincible irony came into action. Suddenly he saw himself and he saw Valentine as puppets whose strings were being slyly pulled by the common hands of a showman. And the showman was Mark Trever. But he would prove to Trever and also to Valentine that he had a will of his own. His play had been created by him. It was his property. He would do with it what he chose to do. And now he felt within him the result of the hardening process which had been

brought into being by his success. He was a somebody now. People wanted him. And his talent was wanted. He knew that he had been flattered by the line Champion had taken at Ciro's. His irony sneered at that fact. And yet something in him was warmed by it.

He listened, and fancied he heard his vanity purring.

That evening he got a telephone message from the Central Theatre. Champion and Grant were going to read his play that night. They would let him know the next day what they thought about it. He was conscious of excitement, of suspense. But both of these feelings were dominated by the enfolding emotion that was connected with Valentine.

How would she take this break through, this cool assertion of his complete independence when his work was in question? Success had certainly made of her, at any rate for the moment, a tyrant. Her native arrogance had been increased by success. Champion had often called her a bully. It was an ugly word. But wasn't it a true word applied to her? With shame Dale acknowledged to himself that he was capable of feeling afraid of her. It was that feeling of fear which decided him to tell her at once what had happened.

But Champion forestalled him. Before Dale had been able to do what he intended to do he received the following note brought by hand from the theatre.

"Caliban has just been here, and has told me that you have given him your new play, and that he and Grant are going to read it and decide about it to-night. I told him I knew you meant to give it to them. I also told him that he and Grant needn't think of me for the chief woman's part, as I had other arrangements in view, and meant to leave the Central at the end of the run of the present play. I didn't tell him that I don't choose to have dealings with a dishonourable man who breaks his promises, and throws over those who have worked their hardest to help him to success.

"V. M."

Dale read this note twice, standing in the little hall of his house. Then he folded the paper together gently. He did that gently because he was blazing with anger, because he was

hating Valentine, because he was—this obscurely—hating himself. His natural sensitiveness was flayed by Valentine's words. He hated her for thus flaying him. And it wasn't true. He had never made a definite promise to give his play to her, or even to read it to her before showing it to others. He had not been dishonourable. He hadn't thrown anyone over. It was a lie. She was angry, and lied, feeling for the words that would sting him, cut him to the quick. And of course she had found them. Her cruelty had guided her unerringly to them.

But she had no doubt expected that no one would see his play before her. He had—hadn't he?—allowed her to expect that. But he had never said what he was going to do. No; it was she who had said it. It was she who had assumed, she who had stated—because she had been certain of his inevitable obedience to her. And now she attacked him with this cruel weapon.

In a heat of anger he sat down at his writing-table and took a pen.

"DEAR MISS MORRIS,"

No. There was something too petty in the abrupt formality of that. It was suburban.

"DEAR VALENTINE,

"I am not dishonourable, nor have I broken any promise. I have written a play. The leading part I designed for you. I never said that no one should see the play before you had seen it. *You* may have said that—not I. The play is mine. I am perfectly free to do whatever I like with it. Champion asked me to-day to let him and Grant have the first reading of it, and, knowing of course that I had written the leading part for you, told me that if they liked the play they would be willing to engage you for it at twice the salary you are getting now. That is how things stand at present. I have not thrown you over. I am incapable of such an action. Of course you know it. But you love to be cruel. I claim the absolute right to do what I choose with my own play. You know my feeling for you. You know my opinion of your splendid gifts. But apparently

you don't yet know that I've got a will of my own.

"Yours sincerely——"

"No—that's too damned suburban."

And slowly, forcing himself, he over-wrote "sincerely."

"Yr. friend,

"MARTIN."

Then he put this letter into an envelope, addressed it, and sent Macfarlane with it to Wilton Crescent. Valentine would find it that night when she got home from the theatre, or when she got home from some party, or dance, which had lured her after the play was over. For she now went out a great deal in society. Her life was complicated. She lived it strongly, almost recklessly. Her vitality seemed inexhaustible. She was seen at dances, at one or two of the ultra-smart night clubs. But she avoided the typical gatherings of the theatrical world. She never showed at a Covent Garden Ball, or at one of those vast mixtures which "Charity," suffering long and being kind, occasionally elaborates at the Albert Hall. Ciro's never saw her. The Royal Automobile Club never saw her. Some called her a Bacchante, but she was never seen with vine leaves in her hair rioting in the open to the blare of vulgar music. "No" was still a word greatly loved and much used by her. But she lived very fast, though exclusively, and she was admitted to, and appreciated in, houses where actors and actresses very seldom set foot.

The existence of Brian had been long ago known by everybody who had entered into Valentine's life, and by multitudes outside of it. Miss Morris and her little boy had become what Lady Bremmish called "a distinctive feature" of London life. Since the war, again according to Lady Bremmish, "we have all become much more broad-minded." By that broad-mindedness, or, as some chose to call it, that lack of all moral standards, Valentine profited. What would formerly have been named effrontery was now spoken of as moral courage, by some even as a noble frankness. It was astonishing how Valentine's celebrity lifted her lapse to the throne of virtue. The girls who were intimate with Valentine found the existence and presence of Brian delightfully piquant. Their mothers, seeing Valentine a success, realising that she would

be a success whatever line they took, spoke vaguely, but in a Christian spirit, of the impropriety of "casting the first stone." The men were merely amused, and, in some cases, sexually excited by Brian's being there. There were of course a few people who couldn't reconcile it with their principles to smile upon "open immorality." These avoided Valentine and spoke of her as the sort of woman one doesn't care to be intimate with. Two or three of them were important. But they couldn't stem the tide of her personal triumph. They could only be cold and distant, and not ask her to their houses. She didn't seem to notice, or to be troubled by, their pre-war prejudices. "I've had Brian, and I'm not going to pretend I haven't," she said. And really there was in her "effrontery," as the pale shadow which was all that was left of Mrs. Grundy called it, both frankness and courage. And it was astonishing how this frankness and courage were lauded by hypocrites. Valentine was such a success that they couldn't but appreciate her lack of the humbug which governed their lives.

And then she was a remarkable actress. And you can't expect these great artists to be exactly like other people. They have to "know life," and if knowing life means the coming into an illegitimate existence of charming little boys with dark hair and blue eyes, well, really, it can't be helped.

On the whole Brian was accepted.

Hitherto no one surely, except Dale, had the slightest idea who his father was, unless it were Carrie Geean. Dale sometimes suspected that she knew or guessed. But he wasn't certain of it. Valentine, reckless though she often was in conversation, knew exactly what she didn't intend to say. Dale had found out that long ago.

But if Valentine openly connected herself with Trever in management mightn't people begin to get on the track of the truth? Already once or twice Champion and Grant had wondered, to Dale, whether Trever hadn't perhaps had something to do with Valentine in the long ago days of "The Island of Dreams." They had never said a word linking Brian with Trever. Dale didn't believe that it had ever occurred to either of them that Brian was Trever's child. Any suspicions they had about Valentine and the handsome young actor had been aroused by Trever's apparent former anxiety not to have Valentine in the cast at the Central Theatre.

But if she went into management with Trever?

Dale's jealousy, silently protesting against that, called up fears that he told himself were justified. Valentine's frankness about Brian had never been extended in the direction of Brian's father. Dale was sure that a strong reticence in her had made her wish till now to keep that secret safely. Certainly now and then, as when she had given her first party in Wilton Crescent, she had shown a certain favour to Trever that she had never shown to her other comrades of the stage, with the exception of Sir Eden Isle. But with regard to Trever she had generally been circumspect, although a wide carelessness of speech and conduct was usually characteristic of her.

But if she went into management with Trever?

Dale began to feel that if he succeeded in preventing that he would be protecting Valentine against herself. And in spite of the flaying note he had received from her he still thought that if she read the part he had been writing for her with such loving care and intensity she wouldn't be able to refuse it.

Unless Trever——

Why did Valentine love such a man? And Dale thought bitterly of the false note that makes a hideous dissonance in so many human lives. And suddenly he asked himself: "Is Valentine my false note?"

He didn't destroy her attack on him. He locked it up in his writing-table drawer. He had the strange instinct to keep with him, in his possession, the words that had hurt him so cruelly.

The following day passed without any further communication from Valentine. He wondered what impression his letter had made upon her. Not for a moment did he regret having sent it. The sending of it had stiffened his resolution not to be governed by a woman.

Late in the afternoon he had a telephone message from Champion, asking him to come at once to Park Lane if he were free. He went there and found Grant in the Gordon Hotel library with Champion. After greetings, Champion said:

"Well, we've read your play."

"You've been quick," said Dale.

"I'm not one to waste time when it's a question of business."

"No," said Grant. "Or you wouldn't be in Park Lane, would you, Jack?"

"It's my wife likes Park Lane," growled Champion.

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"Well, what d'you think of the play?" asked Dale, with an air of assurance.

"Damned good!" said Champion.

"Fine!" said Grant.

"I'm glad you like it."

"But it's got one big drawback," said Grant.

"What's that?"

"Why, the woman's part is so absolutely fitted to Miss Morris, cut to her figure, as you might say, that we can't see any other woman in it. Can we, Jack?"

"No," said Champion, gruffly.

"Why's that a drawback?" asked Dale, assuming a light-hearted manner which didn't accord with his feeling.

"Why? Because Miss Morris tells us she doesn't intend to stay with us after the run of your play's over, says she's made other arrangements."

"I guess you know pretty well what they are," said Grant.

"I only know what Champion told me," Dale said. "She's never spoken to me about them."

"She's as sly and slippery as the devil," said Champion.

"The question is what we're going to do. Lez and I have turned over the names of all the leading women in London, but we can't think of one who could play the part you've written as it ought to be played, except Miss Morris."

"Then we must get her to play it," said Dale, with determination.

"That's easy saying," said Champion. "But Lez and I have both been with her to-day, and she won't hear of it. It isn't a question of money. We'd give her what she wants, within reason, of course. We told her what a part she'd have. But she wouldn't hear of staying with us, says she's through with the Central."

"What's put her back up, Dale?" asked Grant. "Do you know?"

"But Champion told me she was going into management with Trever."

"There's more than that in it," said Grant.

"It's because we've read the play before she's had a chance to," said Champion. "That's what it is."

After a silence he added:

"Anyhow, we can't go on our knees to her, if that's what she wants."

"But if she is really going into management how——"

"Oh, that could be delayed easy enough if she could be got to see reason. But if ever there was an unreasonable woman——"

He broke off. He was obviously exasperated, much more exasperated than Grant was. And again a question came up in Dale's mind. Was Champion's feeling for Valentine what it seemed to be? Or had her almost severely sincere talent, her wayward nature, even her very insolence, captivated him? That he was almost perpetually angry with her was obvious. But that anger perhaps sprang from an intimacy of feeling which he himself rebelled against and was determined to conceal. Dale's love of diagnosis drove him to make a test.

"If Miss Morris won't stay with you, perhaps I could find someone else who could play the part," he said.

Champion stared, as if in blank astonishment.

"Who?" asked Grant, turning a penholder which he picked up from the writing-table between his thick fingers.

"Oh, I should have to think and go round the theatres."

"Not a bit of good!" said Champion roughly. "It's a Morris part, and that's all there is to it."

"Then shall I see her and try to persuade her?"

"You can if you like," said Champion. "But take care or she'll bite you."

Dale forced a smile, and said with energy:

"You'll never persuade me to be afraid of Miss Morris."

"Who says anyone's afraid? But that woman's the most damnable proposition I ever tackled."

"You go to her, Dale," said Grant. "She likes you."

"Does she?" said Champion, with an ugly smile.

Dale couldn't prevent the startled blood from rising in his face.

"Why—doesn't she?" said Grant, turning his dark plaintive eyes from Dale to Champion.

Champion touched Dale's right arm. Then, still showing the ugly smile, he said to him:

"Go, my boy! Go and find out!"

"I will," said Dale firmly. "I'll go to-night."

CHAPTER XX

WHEN he left Champion's house—Mrs. Champion called it a mansion—and the important hall door was shut behind him by the young giant in livery, Dale looked at his watch. It was just seven o'clock. Where would Valentine be at that hour? After walking a little way Dale hailed a taxi-cab and drove to Wilton Crescent.

"Is Miss Morris in?" he asked of the smart parlourmaid who answered his ring.

"No, sir. She went out just before six o'clock."

Dale hesitated. He felt at that moment a great reluctance to see Valentine at the theatre. Usually she arrived there about half-past seven; he had hoped to catch her at home and perhaps to drive with her there. It wouldn't do to go to her when she was dressing and making up for her part.

"D'you happen to know at what time she'll be home to-night?" he asked.

"No, sir. But I believe she's going out with Miss Geean after the theatre."

Going out with Miss Geean! And Miss Geean's money talked in theatre land.

"Oh—thank you."

Dale was about to turn away from the door when a light treble voice called from within,

"Uncle Martin!"

"Hulloh!"

A small boy, in a knickerbocker suit, ran out from the dim inner hall.

"Hulloh, Brian!"

The boy clasped Dale's hand confidentially.

"Where you going, Uncle Martin?"

"I want to see Mummy."

"Mummy's out. Mummy's always out. Where you going?"

"I'm going to find her—presently."

The Pekingese joined them from the hall and stood beside them blinking at London.

"Mummy's acting. She's always acting."

"What have you been doing to-day?"

"I've been in the Garden by Peter Pan, playing. I'm

going to have supper now. I'm going to have baked apples for supper and cream. Not milk—*cream*. D'you know what Mummy's done ? ”

“ No. What has she done ? ”

Brian looked terribly serious.

“ She's bought something,” he almost whispered.

“ Has she ? ”

“ Yes. What d'you think ? ”

“ A—another doggie ? ”

“ No, a motor-car. And it shuts.”

“ Does it ? ”

“ Yes. When she bought it it was open. But now it shuts ! ”

“ How splendid ! ”

“ She didn't choose it,” said Brian, earnestly.

“ Didn't she ? ”

“ No. Mr. Trever chose it, and told her. And what d'you think ? ”

“ What ? ” said Dale, bending a little.

“ He wants me to call him Uncle Mark. But I won't.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because I don't want to.”

At this moment a round-faced, middle-aged woman appeared.

“ Brian, your supper's ready.”

“ Is there any *cream* with the apples ? ”

“ To be sure there is. Good evening, sir.”

“ Good evening, nurse. He looks well.”

“ Yes, there isn't much the matter with *him*.”

“ Good-bye, Brian boy.”

“ Good-bye, Uncle Martin. I say ! ”

“ Yes.”

Brian stretched up.

“ I *shan't* call him Uncle Mark.”

Dale gave the little boy a hug and watched him vanish in the hall. Then he turned away and walked into Knightsbridge.

He was unhappy, dreadfully uneasy in mind. It was impossible for him not to realise that Valentine must be falling again, if indeed she had not already fallen, under the spell of an old dominion. Brian's words had disturbed him even more than the definite assertions of Champion. And the episode of the motor-car ! It was unimportant enough, but it proved that Valentine was allowing Trever to push

himself into her intimate life. Valentine hadn't chosen the new motor-car, "Mr. Trever chose it and told her." And now he was evidently trying to "get at" Brian. That was a very definite move on his part in the direction of Valentine. Brian had meant nothing to him. But now Brian's mother was on the crest of the wave. Dale hadn't forgotten Valentine's cruel diagnosis of Trever's character. He hadn't forgotten her words, "A shark is strange. But a human being like that"—like Trever—"is stranger still, I think." She knew exactly what Trever was, and yet she was permitting this ugly return of his towards her, knowing what caused it.

"But she shan't have my play to give to Trever!" Dale said to himself, with a blaze of anger.

And suddenly he felt hard, capable of a fight, ready to confront Valentine not merely with self-possession but with strong determination.

"I'll make her take back what she wrote to me. I'll make her tell me she knows it wasn't true."

But he didn't want to see her at the theatre.

Recently he had been elected to the Garrick Club. Presently he turned in there, went to the writing-room and wrote the following letter:

"DEAR VALENTINE,

I must see you about the matter of the play. I went to your house just now and didn't find you. Your servant told me you are going out with Miss Geean to-night after the theatre. I don't wish to see you at the theatre. Let us meet to-morrow. Any time you fix will suit me. If you don't telephone in the morning I'll come to your house at six.

Yr. friend

MARTIN."

He left this note at the stage door of the Central Theatre and went home. He had an engagement that night, but he broke it. He felt that he must be alone.

A few minutes before twelve on the following morning Valentine telephoned, through a servant. This was the message:

"Miss Morris can see Mr. Dale at six if it is really important. But she has an engagement at six-fifteen."

Dale's reply was : " Please tell Miss Morris I will call at six."

Valentine's message had made him feel angry, but he had no intention of allowing his anger to deflect him from his purpose. At five minutes before six he was in Wilton Crescent. When the maid saw him she said :

" Please to come in, sir. Miss Morris isn't back yet. But she should be here directly."

She showed him into the long living-room at the back of the house. He sat down on a deep sofa to wait. And while he waited he got mentally outside of himself, looked on at himself, considered himself with irony.

" So this is what you've come to, you successful man ! Like so many men whom you've secretly considered with scorn, looked on at with superior wonder, you're in the grip of a woman. You've come here to have it out with her. You're fighting your own weakness. But you're in her grip. She's beginning to torment your life. And all your success isn't helping you, because the thing you call your heart is out of hand."

Life is full of the pitiable. But was he really going to join and to remain among the innumerable pitiable ? He knew he had an obstinate will. Instinctively he made his body tense. Valentine would never be influenced by a man who showed weakness in connection with herself. Trevor must have self-confidence, great self-confidence, probably even great conceit. Valentine, in her diagnosis, hadn't called him a weak man.

" Oh—is he ? Don't let anyone else in. I haven't much time."

She was speaking in that very individual voice of hers, soft and dark generally but capable of acute changes. Dale was taken by surprise. He hadn't heard the front door opened, hadn't felt that she was in the house. The sound of her voice so near startled him, even shook him. He got up. She came in wearing a long white coat and looking, he thought, rebellious. There was hardness in her big brown eyes as they gazed steadily into his. She shut the door and said :

" I meant what I wrote to you I mean it now."

" And I meant what I wrote to you. But it is I who set down truth, not you."

" You are a subtle man. You are subtle enough to know

that a thing can exist, exist in two minds, a definite understanding, without ever being stated. Flat statements may be necessary between vulgar fools, but not between us. Our minds, yours and mine, knew that your play was being written for me, not for Caliban."

"Don't call him that!"

"But I will. We were friends you and I. There was something kindred in our natures, and we both knew that. And we knew that Caliban was outside, in the outer darkness. He was a brute to me when he was able to be. And then you stuck to me. I felt I had a friend. When I put my face to the wall like Hezekiah—" here there was a touch of her buffoon-manner, and for a second her eyes changed—"you came to me in sympathy. We felt alike you and I. That should have drawn us together. And I thought it had. But now I know that it didn't. Caliban really suits you better than I do."

"What a lie! What a lie!"

"I say it's true. You have hurt me."

"And d'you suppose your letter didn't hurt me?"

"I meant it to hurt you."

"You enjoy hurting people. You've got a strain of sheer cruelty in you."

"I have been hurt!" she said, with simplicity, as if all the reason of her cruelty lay in that.

Now and then Valentine had a flash of simplicity that Dale found disarming. The first time he had been with her, when she had said, "I have nothing in prospect," he had been charmed and even touched. She was a sincere woman, dreadfully unreasonable—but sincere.

"Are we all to be hurt because you have been hurt?"

"You have put Caliban before me. You have gone over to Caliban's side. I never thought you would do that."

"I haven't done it. There's no question of sides. If you would only see reason!"

"When a man wants a woman to *see reason*, all it means is that he wants her to agree with him and give in to his will."

"Why shouldn't I let Caliban—" he pulled himself up sharply. "Tsh! Champion—"

"Caliban! You have said it! *You* have said Caliban!"

The irresponsible look he knew so well showed in her eyes and she began to laugh.

"Caliban! Everybody's beginning to call him Caliban!"
 "Remember," Dale said, sternly. "He made you cry once by his understanding of your beautiful art."

She was silent, but her face changed, softened.

"Valentine, we only want you to stay on at the Central. We want you for the play, all of us. Champion will double your salary."

"I don't need his dirty money!" she exclaimed. "Money—money—as if I only cared for money!"

Dale looked round the beautiful room.

"Oh, how I hate you when you're ironical!" she said, fiercely.

"But——"

"Because I'm poor and have to earn my living, because I care for beauty as every artist must, that doesn't mean that I will sell myself to a brute just because he can make me rich."

"Save yourself! What do you mean? I'm talking about your salary as an actress."

She said nothing.

"What do you mean?" he repeated. "This is only a question of business. Isn't it? *Isn't it?*"

"Well, haven't I the right to do business, or to refuse to do business, as I choose?"

Dale said nothing for a moment. He felt that she was evading him. He looked at her but she didn't return his gaze. An ugly thought came up in his mind, but he didn't express it.

"The fact is, I suppose," he said. "That you've got some plan in your head which you've never mentioned to me. Somebody is tempting you away to another theatre. Is that it?"

She didn't answer.

"Then what about your friendship for me? You've never said a word to me about it. You've kept me in the dark although you say you knew the play I was writing was being written for you. And then you attack me, call me dishonourable, insult me. Your letter to me was insulting."

Abruptly anger blazed out of Dale. His dark eyes shone as if with menace. For a moment there seemed to be hatred in his face as he looked at her. His hands began to tremble. He saw her staring at them and that increased his anger; but it also woke up his irony. He saw himself as a short,

stocky man in a passion, and he thrust his hands out of sight into the pockets of his jacket.

"What does it matter?" he muttered. "Who cares? You're a free agent. But so am I. I will not be ruled by—by a woman who doesn't care tuppence about me!"

("Poor short, stocky man! And so you must needs say that, and give yourself away hopelessly!")

"Martin!"

"Well?"

"What made you give your play to Caliban instead of showing it to me first? I know there is a reason."

"I chose to. That's all."

"Now you are lying and clumsily."

A savage impulse to truth tore Dale.

"I hadn't written the play to hand it over to Trever."

"Who told you—why should you think——"

"Isn't it true that you are thinking of going into management with Trever at the London Playhouse, with Miss Geean as your backer? Isn't that true?"

"So Caliban told you that!"

"Caliban—Champion! But lots of people know it. Apparently I'm the only fool who's been kept in the dark. And I'm supposed to be your friend. And I've been writing a play for you, sweating blood to try to do something worthy of you. It's a damned shame! And then on the top of it all I get a letter from you telling me I'm a dishonourable man and that you'll have nothing more to do with me."

She saw a resentment amounting perhaps to hatred burning in his eyes, but burning behind a thin veil of moisture.

"Martin," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But I do think you might at least have told me you were taking your play to Caliban. Just imagine! He came into my room at the theatre and said, 'Well, Miss Morris, we've got your friend Dale's new play, and we're just off to read it. To-morrow I'll be able to tell you what it's like, and whether there's any part in it likely to suit you.' What do you say to that?"

Dale was silent.

She sat down on the sofa close to where he was standing. Her expression had changed. She looked like another woman.

"Wasn't that a shock for me?"

Still Dale said nothing.

"And his face while he spoke to me—it was triumphant. D'you know that a vulgar man never shows the full measure

of his vulgarity till he's triumphant? But then——! But I soon pricked the bladder and let all the wind out. I told him lies. But he believed them."

"Were they lies? You said he needn't offer the part to you, that you had made other arrangements and were leaving the Central. Was that a lie?"

"I shall leave the Central now. But if you had come to me with your play first, and if you had said that you wanted me to stay with Caliban and to act in it for him and Grant, and if I had been sure that your play was exactly right for a big theatre like the Central and that the principal part was one that I could do full justice to, then I would have stayed in spite of all."

She said the last words with a significance which roused in him a painful feeling of curiosity.

"In spite of what, Valentine?" he asked.

She looked down.

"Won't you tell me?"

"Why should I? I don't think it's necessary."

"Tell me this at any rate. Is it something to do with Champion, something very personal?"

"Yes," she said, with the simple directness he loved in her.

"Has he—has Champion—you don't mean that Champion has ever——"

"No. But I don't need to be given hard facts before I can understand intentions."

"Intentions?"

Dale remembered certain vague ideas about Champion which had gone through his mind and perturbed it, and a commonplace action came, like a vision, before those eyes which can see the not there: a large hand pushing a plate of sponge cakes towards a woman waiting to hear a verdict.

"Are you sure?" he said, instinctively lowering his voice.

"Quite sure. Life on the stage brings a certain type of knowledge to every woman."

"And what's that?"

"Knowledge of the habits of the wolf in man. Martin, I have been through the mill. I have received education. I know exactly what wolf-men are. I know when they are on the trail. I know."

"But Trevor? Will you go into management with Trevor?"

"I don't want to. I don't want to."

The sincerity in her voice was unmistakable. But it was mingled with a sound of helplessness.

Dale sat down by her, took her left hand and kept it in his. All his anger against her had died away.

"Then it isn't settled?"

"Oh no. It's only the other day that I guessed what Trever was thinking of, what he wanted. He can be clever at times. He has been clever with me."

"Then he is trying for that?"

"Yes. And I have just found out that he has got Carrie to say that she would back him on certain conditions."

"Does she know?"

"About me and Trever?"

"Yes."

"No. Nobody knows except mother and you."

"Don't do it, Valentine. Stick to me. We began together—began to be successful together, I mean. Let's go on together. Don't let us break away from each other now. If we do my instinct tells me we shall both be taking the risk of failure."

"What's failure? What's success? Can't you find a better reason?"

"I could. But it wouldn't appeal to you."

He was still holding her hand. Now she turned towards him, put her other hand on his and said,

"I do care very much for what is called success. But sometimes I want it disentangled from all that clings on to it, want it like a pure, cold, naked jewel that I can hold in my hand. Sometimes I want it disentangled from men."

"Men!"

"Can you, a man, conceive it possible for a woman, who's a thorough woman, mind you, not a freak, to long for complete freedom from men? To have success purged, by itself, not muddled up with clawing males! That would be classic! As an artist I have a desire to strip things, to show them exactly as they are in their nakedness. Most actresses I know aim at dressing up a part, *making* it, as they say. I aim at undressing it. My success! Caliban's trying to claw at it. He wants to be in it with me. And Trever wants to be in it. And, Martin dear, even you want to be in it with me. Not for sordid reasons—but you do! It's always so with an actress. There are always men in everything she does. Sometimes I want—I want—I seem to want all maleness out of my life. Father Bexland would understand."

"That priest!"

"Yes. He was a guardsman once, before he entered into religion. He had to disentagle himself—but from women. He understands that side of me."

"You're surely not one of those unsexed women who hate men?"

"No. One side of me is dreadfully susceptible to men."

"You spoke of disentangling. Begin by disentangling yourself from Trever."

At this moment the door was opened slowly and gently, and the parlourmaid said:

"The car is at the door, Madam."

"All right."

The maid went away, shutting the door.

"I shall have to go now, Martin. I'm dining with Carrie at Kerry's."

"But we haven't settled anything."

"It's Life that settles things for us."

"But about the play?"

"What can I do? I have told Caliban I won't stay at the Central."

"But now I've given him my word. I can't take the play away from him."

"Does he like it? Does Grant like it?"

"Yes. But they say there's no actress who could play the part I wrote for you except you. They say it's a Morris part. I've been too successful. I've written the part with—
with too much love."

"Love—Martin?"

"Of you. I've put my heart's understanding of you into it, as well as my brain's understanding of you—I suppose. And I think even Champion feels it."

"He's got a love of truth under all his vileness, and even an understanding of truth. That's the only thing in his nature that I'm in sympathy with."

"Has Trever got either?"

Suddenly her face was distorted.

"No; not even that! I must go. Kiss me."

Dale put his arms round her.

"Oh—Valentine!"

When the car which Trever had chosen drove away with her in it they had settled nothing.

CHAPTER XXI

DALE and Valentine were friends again. That fact made Dale much happier. The difficulty between them had caused him to realise how dreadfully dependent he had become since he had known her. Formerly he had felt himself to be independent. Ambition had been such a companion to him that he had seldom felt lonely. But now, although success had been added to the sum of his life, he knew what loneliness was. During the short time that his quarrel with Valentine had lasted he had come to understand exactly how necessary she was to his happiness, how miserable and how deprived he would be without the association to which he had so quickly become accustomed. Before their quarrel he had often nursed unhappiness born of the knowledge that she wasn't the least bit in love with him. Now he clung to their friendship. It wasn't enough in his life but it was terribly important. He couldn't bear to lose it. Nevertheless he had made up his mind that he would never be a slave to Valentine. In their quarrel he had stood up to her. She had seen his will in action. And that was all to the good. For Champion was right. Dale agreed with him that Valentine was a bit of a bully. There was in her the something ungovernable, the something that at times "took charge," of which she had spoken to him in their first days of friendship. But there was also something fundamentally sincere and even simple which appealed to something in him. And in all questions connected with art they understood each other instinctively. That made a link between them.

But there were influences at work to divide them.

Formerly Dale had been tormented by the difficulty of getting his plays accepted. Now, in the full tide of his success, he knew another type of difficulty. Champion and Grant had the right to his next play. They lost no time in getting out a contract and within two days of their acceptance of the play they sent for Dale to come to the theatre and sign it. This he couldn't refuse to do. He had given them the play to read "on offer". He couldn't withdraw it. Yet he was reluctant to sign the contract. There was so much behind it besides mere business.

Valentine's words about Champion clung, like burrs, to his

memory. He was now compelled to see Champion not merely as a keen man of business but also as a wolf-man on the trail. He knew that Champion's anxiety to get the contract signed was sharpened by a desire that had nothing to do with money making. From the first Champion's action in connection with the play had been prompted by a secret determination to keep Valentine in the Central Theatre. The lunch at Ciro's had been part of a scheme, which was quite plain to Dale now. Not for a moment did he think of doubting the accuracy of Valentine's perceptions. She was a trained woman in certain matters. She couldn't go wrong in them.

Champion had undoubtedly "cornered" him; Dale knew that. And he obeyed the summons to the theatre with a reluctance that, as he realised it, made the irony in him smile bitterly. To be going to one of the most famous theatres in London to sign a first-rate contract with reluctance! And all because of a woman who loved another man! How easily, scarcely making the effort of a child, did love lay ambition in the grave. The grotesqueness of life!

As he went in at the stage door of the theatre, although he knew he had come to sign a contract, he didn't feel certain that when presently he went out by that door the contract would be signed.

He found Champion and Grant in the managers' room, Grant as usual seated in the round chair before the big writing-table, Champion standing up near a window, looking big, dissipated and determined. Some documents lay on the table in front of Grant.

"Hullo Dale!" said Grant, smiling. "Up to time! You're the most business-like playwright in London."

"He knows when he's on to a good thing," said Champion, with false joviality. "How are you, boy?"

He stretched out a big hand.

"Have a drink? A cigar?"

Dale refused both and sat down by the table.

"That the contract?" he asked.

"Yes," said Grant. "Just run through it, won't you? It's exactly the same as the other contract we made with you. I suppose that's satisfactory. It didn't keep you exactly poor, did it?"

"Ask his bankers that, Lez!" said Champion, with a laugh that was meant to be hearty.

Dale took the contract from Grant.

"We'll have in Meyer to witness it," said Grant.

Dale saw the thumb about to make its accustomed movement and stopped it.

"Just a moment!" he said.

"What is it?" said Champion. "Oh, I know! Give him time to run through it, Lex. What's the hurry?"

"It isn't that," said Dale.

"No?"

"What I want to say is this. You've both of you read my play. You both of you can't see any actress but Miss Morris in the principal part. Isn't it so?"

Grant and Champion looked at each other.

"Well, as to that——" began Champion.

"But you told me so!" said Dale.

"It certainly is a Morris part," said Champion, "But——"

"Suppose I sign this contract and then we can't get Miss Morris for the play? What then?"

"Sign, boy, and we'll get her right enough!" said Champion, with an ugly smile.

"But I've seen Miss Morris and she told me she didn't mean to stay on here after the run of my present play's over. She wrote that to me. Then I went to see her. And she told me so."

"That's only talk," said Grant.

"It's just bluff," said Champion. "To get us to put up the price on her. I tell you, Miss Morris is a damned good business woman and I don't blame her for it."

"What I'm driving at is this," said Dale. "Suppose it isn't bluff? Suppose we can't get Miss Morris to stay in the theatre? What would be the good of my signing this contract?"

"Every bit of good!" exclaimed Champion. "You've promised us your play and we've accepted it, with or without Miss Morris. But you needn't worry. She'll come to heel all right once she's seen the part you've written for her. Now, Dale, you've given us your word, and all we ask you to do is to stick to it. We'll take care of Miss Morris."

"Very well!" said Dale, after a pause.

He felt an intense reluctance to sign the contract. But what else could he do now?

"Want to read it?" said Grant.

"I'd better run through it."

He began to read. There was silence in the room, only broken once by the soft sound Grant made when sucking his teeth. Dale read every word—slowly. But at last he had finished.

"All right, isn't it?" said Grant.

"Yes."

"Then we'll sign right away," said Champion. "Ring for Meyer, Lez!"

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"There, that's done!" Champion said, a few minutes later. "And now I'll tell you what we'll do. It's up to you, Dale, to bring the thing off."

"To bring what off?"

"Why the deal with Val Morris, to be sure."

Dale felt as if he shrivelled.

"I don't understand," he said, grimly.

"All you've got to do is this. Tell her you've signed with us and then read her the play. She may try to kick. But when she's heard her part and we offer her a contract double as good as the one she has now she'll feed out of our hands. If I don't know the psychology, as they call it, of a leading actress then Adam wasn't the first of us to pass the post in the days of Creation. Aren't I right, Lez?"

"Dead right, if I know anything Jack."

"Will you do it, Dale?"

"Of course I'll speak to Miss Morris and see——"

"Stop a bit!" said Champion. "I know what we'll do. Got a house, haven't you?"

"A house! Yes. I live in Tedworth Square, as you know."

"All I mean is, you've got a place you can ask us to?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then fix up a reading of your play, and just ask Lez and me and Val Morris. *Chez vous*—you understand. And then we'll talk business. Don't tell her we're coming. Just ask her, and we'll happen to drop in. See?"

"I really couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't do anything underhand with Miss Morris."

"Underhand? What's there underhand? Can't we happen to call on business when she's there?"

"If I do it I must do it my own way."

"And what's that, if one may ask?" said Champion.

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"I'll tell Miss Morris exactly how things are, and ask her if she'll come to my house and hear the play."

"With us?"

"I'll suggest that if you wish it."

"We do wish it. Don't we, Lez?"

Grant nodded his serious head.

"Very well," said Dale. "I'll let you know what happens. But——" he paused.

"Eh? What's that?" said Champion.

"I'm very doubtful that Miss Morris will accept. I'm afraid she's got other plans."

"So she may have. But what does a woman make plans for except to have a chance to change her mind? You'll see I'm right."

"Miss Morris isn't a type. She's an individual," said Dale.

"And a damned extravagant one," said Champion. "I happen to know she's run up a lot of debts. And what does she do on top of them? Buys herself a Napier car that costs God knows what."

"We'll go to two hundred a week for her, Dale," observed Grant, in his quiet and impersonal voice.

"You can rub that in, boy."

Dale suppressed an exclamation, managed (he hoped) to look genial, and went away promising to do what he could.

He hadn't much hope. There were even moments—strange moments these—when he hadn't much desire. Now he knew about Champion a cold feeling of disgust often enveloped him, and he had a longing that was cruelly intimate to take away Valentine from the Central Theatre, even to take her away from the stage. Her words "clawing males" continually recurred to his mind. What a fool he had been to fall in love with an actress. And he was dreadfully capable of jealousy. He knew that he could even be jealous of Champion. When Champion had said "Val Morris" Dale had longed to strike his big mouth. And now self-interest, the chain of circumstance, obliged Dale to go to Valentine and try to persuade her to stay on at the Central, where Champion would see her every night. And if she refused to stay—then she would go to another theatre where every night she would see, and would act with, Trever.

Dale knew how unhappy, how restless and afraid of the

future, a man can feel in the midst of success and gratified ambition.

And Valentine had debts. That assertion of Champion's was believed by Dale and distressed him obscurely. The need of money leads to so many horrors in difficult life. If only Valentine hadn't that recklessness in her. But without it she wouldn't be Valentine. He must try to reconcile himself to the dark shadows which cut inevitably the bright sunshine of her remarkable gifts. He mustn't want her to have all the humdrum virtues of the ordinary woman. He mustn't require of her both genius and respectability, spendthrift generosity in her art and strict caution in her life. He mustn't be one of the idiots, who demanding the impossible, gather up in the end only handfuls of ashes.

But he did wish Valentine hadn't run into debt, and he did wish that Champion didn't know of that.

As he had said he would, he went to find Valentine in order to try to persuade her to the meeting suggested by Champion. He called twice in Wilton Crescent without finding her, and eventually was obliged to run her to earth in the theatre. There he asked her if she would meet the two managers in Tedworth Square and hear him read his play.

"Why should I? What would be the good?" she asked. "I don't mean to stay here when this run is over."

"You haven't signed with anyone else?" said Dale, feeling suddenly cold as he thought of the woman's part he had written with so much thought and so much secret love.

"No; not yet."

She spoke with unusual gentleness; she even, he thought, looked unusually gentle.

"Then, before deciding anything, I beg you to hear my play."

"With those men?"

She fixed her eyes on him. He hesitated. Something in her eyes made him feel guilty.

"Champion begged me to arrange it," he said. "They have the play. Isn't it natural that—anyhow I promised I would ask you."

"Do you want me to come?"

"I can't forget that they did give me my great chance. I hadn't almost anything of a name."

"And they did see the worth of your work. Or one of them did—Champion perhaps. That's true."

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After a long pause, during which she seemed to be plunged in thought, she said :

"It will be no use—to *them*, but I'll come and hear the play."

"When ? "

"I must look. Blount ? "

"Yes, madam."

"Just bring my engagement book, will you ? "

The dresser came almost immediately, with a book hidden in a loose cover of blue-green Gazelle skin with devices in gold. Valentine looked into it.

"I've got such a lot of things."

"Don't you ever rest ? " he asked.

"I shall if I ever feel tired. To-day's Tuesday. I'll come on Thursday afternoon. It's full up, but I'll break my engagements. I'll be at your house at three o'clock."

And on the Thursday at three o'clock she was there.

Champion and Grant were before her. They had been lunching with Dale, who had warned them that though Valentine was coming she had said her hearing of the play would be of no use to *them*.

"That's all bluff ! " Champion had said. "I know these leading women. Not one of them can resist a part if it's fat enough, and God knows you've given Val Morris enough fat and to spare in this last piece. Mark my words, when she's heard it she'll grab it, for fear of another woman getting it. She's no fool, believe me. Under all her seeming carelessness she's as astute and determined as the devil."

"What an awful lot you seem to know about the devil," Dale had said drily.

"He looks after Jack ! " Grant had remarked. "He put him into Park Lane so as he could keep an eye on him without having to travel."

When Valentine came into the library at Tedworth Square she brought with her, Dale felt, an atmosphere of formality. She looked reserved. Her manner was unusually stiff and polite. It was evident that she meant to treat the occasion severely, as a matter of business. And yet what business could come of it, as she had decided to leave the Central Theatre ?

Dale was nervous. His mind felt terribly alert. He was dreadfully aware of the wolf-man in Champion, and saw him not as a manager trying to "bring off a deal," but as a stealthy

pursuer on the track of a woman. And that woman, he, Dale, happened to love. But he must think of his work, only of that. And he tried to shut out the clamouring subtleties that crowd about the heels of love in a clever man.

"Where would you like to sit, Miss Morris?"

"I'll sit here in the corner of this sofa."

"Do you mind if we smoke?" asked Grant.

"Of course not."

"Let me offer you a cigarette, Miss Morris," said Champion, with unusual elaboration of manner, opening his gold cigarette case.

"No thanks. I'm reading, Mr. Dale."

Her voice and manner were cold, austere. Suddenly Dale felt doubtful of his play. He cleared his throat.

"Act one," he began.

He had seated himself facing Valentine with his writing-table in front of him. The two managers were seated in armchairs to Valentine's right. Champion had glanced towards the empty corner of the sofa, then at Valentine, before deciding on an armchair.

"Act one," Dale repeated.

He moistened his lips, glancing at Valentine stealthily, and then, with an effort, began to read. But while he read he seemed to see before him the strange severity of her face.

He finished the first act, did not pause or ask for any comment, but went on at once to Act two. The play was in four acts. At the end of the second act, when he was half way through his typed manuscript, he stopped. His throat felt dreadfully dry.

"One moment!" he said to his audience of three.

And he got up and rang the bell.

"We'll have something to drink. And wouldn't you like to have some tea before I go on, Miss Morris? There are two more acts."

"Nothing for me, thanks," she answered.

"Yes, sir?" said Macfarlane at the door.

"Just bring us some whisky and Perrier, please."

"Yes, sir."

Macfarlane went out and there was an instant of silence, which was broken by Champion who said:

"Holds you, doesn't it, Miss Morris?"

Valentine didn't speak for an instant, and to Dale that

instant seemed so long that he had time to think that she wasn't going to reply to Champion's question. But then she said :

" Oh, yes."

To Dale there seemed no emotion in her voice.

Grant began to speak and then Macfarlane came in with the drinks, and the three men helped themselves. Dale took a glass of Perrier.

" Now," said Dale, " shall I go on ? "

He looked at Valentine.

" You can stand two more acts ? "

" I came here to hear your play," she said.

" A play always seems rather long in the hearing," he said doubtfully. " But when it's acted—but anyhow——"

" You needn't apologise for your play," said Champion, decisively. " We think it's fine."

" Well then——" said Dale.

But what was Valentine's opinion ? That was what he longed to know, feared to know. Her eyes had told him nothing.

He began to read the third act.

When he had finished reading the play he got up and immediately said :

" Now you must have some tea, Miss Morris. I've kept you such a long time, and I'm afraid I read very badly. Still I hope I gave you an idea of the thing."

He rang the bell again.

" Tea—in the drawing-room, please," he said to Macfarlane.

" Yes, sir."

Grant got up, stretched himself, and stared round the room in his characteristic way, looking very expressive.

" Fine opportunities in that play," he said. " Aren't there, Miss Morris ? "

" No doubt there are."

Champion got up.

" A wonderful woman's part, isn't it ? "

" Quite good," she said.

Suddenly Dale felt defiant. The word " quite " had struck him like a flung stone. All his months of thought, work, love, came before him. Were they to be summed up in the words " Quite good " ? It was strange how at moments Valentine made him hate her.

" Let's go upstairs," he said.

He looked at her. She got up. For a moment he thought that she was going to refuse. He looked out of the window and saw her big Napier car drawn up in front of his door. He thought of her debts, of Champion's wealth, of Trever and Carrie Geean.

"Won't you come?" he said to her.

"Thanks. Yes."

Grant looked at his watch.

"I must be off," he said. "I've got to see—we'll talk to-night at the theatre, Miss Morris, eh?"

"Why not?"

"You coming, Jack?"

Champion hesitated. To Dale it was obvious that he was considering whether it were better policy to stay or to go. Dale wished him away, wished violently with all the strength he had.

"I should like to hear what Miss Morris has to say," he said.

"What about Mr. Champion?" she asked.

"Why about the play to be sure, and especially about the woman's part."

"I can tell you that any time at the theatre."

"Oh—very well!"

He also looked at his watch, a gold repeater.

"By Jove, it is late! I think I'll come with you, Lez."

"Right!"

Champion turned to Dale.

"I'm not a great hand at tea, Dale. That's a fact."

"Then before you go have another——"

"No thanks. Your play's fine—fine!"

He said it with emphasis and with an air of finality.

When he had gone the house at once seemed quite different to Dale. Undoubtedly there was something powerful in Champion's personality. His physical bigness, too, had something impressive in it, or overwhelming in an unpleasant way. The man was tremendously physical. The small house seemed less small without him.

Dale and Valentine stood in the drawing-room.

"Your car's wonderful," said Dale. "Brian told me about it. He's very much impressed by the fact that it can be open and shut."

"Yes. It excited him."

"And you? Doesn't this new life excite you?"

"Already I feel very natural in it."

Macfarlane came in. It was ten minutes later when Dale said, with a sort of desperation:

"What's the good of all this? Valentine, do tell me what you think."

"But you know what *they* think. Isn't that enough?"

"Now drop cruelty. Either we are friends or we aren't friends. I care terribly for your opinion."

"How do you know I've got one?"

"I know, because you're damnably intelligent and as quick as lightning. Now tell me! What's your opinion?"

"Well, Martin, I think that your feeling for me has led you to betray your artistic instinct."

"Betray—how?"

"You've written a wonderful woman's part, but you haven't written a wonderful play. You have thought of me, you have worked for me, to the detriment of your play as a whole. I am very, very touched by what you've done, Martin, I'm sure now you're a man with a great heart. But it's got the better of your brain this time, in my opinion."

"Perhaps you're right."

"I know I am right. Still you've written a play that I could take over the world, star in, make a reputation, a fortune in. That's certain."

"And I've made it over to those two!" said Dale, with desperation.

"Yes, you've made it over to those two."

After a pause he said:

"Won't you stay at the Central and act in it?"

"How can I?"

"Ah, you haven't decided!"

"I have told them I will not stay."

She looked at him, and her eyes seemed just then very kind, but sad.

"Martin, you should have waited."

"Yes. But—but I was driven. When I thought of Trever——"

"It's wrong, it's crazy to mix up all these human emotions which have nothing to do with art—to mix them up with art."

"Then you won't go into management with Trever!" he exclaimed.

"Am I any less wrong, less crazy than you? I have never said so."

"But if you see so clearly!"

"I have clear sight, because I have a clear brain. But I'm a woman in a trap. And I don't believe I can struggle out of it."

There was something hopeless, something fatal, not only in the words but in the voice that spoke them.

"If you and I part company now, divide our forces," Dale said, "I have the conviction that success will desert us."

"Very probably you are right," she said. "Now I must go."

At the front door she said:

"What do you think of my car?"

"It looks terribly expensive."

"I seem to have a natural tendency towards what is expensive."

Just before she drove away he said:

"Don't break away from me, dear, dear Valentine."

"You should have waited," she said.

As the car went away he had a cruel feeling that she was departing out of their comradeship.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Valentine had left him Dale's instinct prompted him to try to see Miss Geean. Although he had been in her company a good many times, and she had always treated him cordially, he didn't feel that he knew her well. He rather liked her, but she puzzled him. There was something aloof in her. He saw, felt her as a being more solitary than the average human being, in spite of her apparently enormous wealth and her many acquaintances. She was a good friend to Valentine, he thought. And he believed that she had some influence over Valentine. If that were so, and if she were using it in Mark Trever's favour at this critical moment in Valentine's career, she was surely making a mistake. Dale made up his mind to be more unreserved with Miss Geean than he had been hitherto,

and he wrote to her and asked her to give him an hour of her time as he wished to consult her about something. In reply he received a telephone message asking him to come down to her house in Surrey on the following Sunday and to spend the day with her. She would be quite alone for lunch.

Quite alone on a Sunday in the very midst of the season !
Really she was an odd woman.

On the Sunday—it chanced to be fine—he motored down to Lamley Common. He knew Farnham and the neighbourhood but he had never before been to the White House. He found it, as Valentine had described it to him, quite small, but with one large room. This room was used by Miss Geean as a dining room and drawing-room combined. For each meal a table was carried in from some hidden place by servants and set down, as if casually, near a window. And there the hostess and her friends—if there were any—lunched or dined. Unless the weather were very fine. In very fine weather the table was taken out of doors and set on the broad terrace which ran along the front of the house, facing a big view over the semi-wild, semi-sophisticated county which has attracted so many celebrities, and which still seems to whisper to some people: "Meredith loved me. That's my great secret. But I can't help telling it to you."

Miss Geean met Dale on the terrace. She was in white, and appeared to him to be simply dressed ; but a woman would have known that the gown she wore came from a dressmaker of genius. That day she looked unusually young. And Dale thought: "She can't be so very much over thirty—can she?" Always in connection with Miss Geean question followed closely on the heels of statement.

She showed him the house and the gardens, and told him how she had bought the place for the grounds.

"I think I have improved them, but they were beautiful already. There was a large house, pseudo-Georgian, stuffy, with a strange rash—it was like that—of pillars, the sort of house even healthy people have asthma in."

"But where is it?"

"I had it taken down and this cottage put in its place. An American architect came over and planned it for me. Willy Van Brent is his name. Do you know it?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"He's famous in the States. He's a great friend of mine."

"It's a lovely little house. You have a genius for

selecting and arranging, if you furnished it, and chose the decorations."

"Oh, I saw to it all. But I was helped by one or two people."

"It's so wonderfully simple, and yet so wonderfully comfortable! As to the gardens——"

He turned to her and said abruptly:

"Do you realise how fortunate you are?"

At that moment the awful poverty in which the greater part of humanity lives seemed to surge upon him, like something enormous, black, greasy, foetid, and full—that was strange—of noises.

She met his gaze firmly.

"I do indeed!" she said in her quiet voice.

"She *has* been poor!" he said to himself. "And that's why she interests me."

At that moment for the first time he saw in her, like a governing principle embodied, alive, personal, even with a face—the determination to be rich.

"We are lunching outside. Do you mind?" she asked him.

"Mind! In front of that view!"

"That's Tilford Common you see in the distance, looking blue."

"Where you ride?"

"Yes. This is good country for riding."

"Valentine once told me—on a white horse, half Arab."

"Yes, only half. I'm rather ashamed of him. I don't like mixed breeds. But his paces were so wonderful that I had to buy him. Now you must be hungry, and I am."

Dale had dined and lunched with Miss Geean in her London house. He therefore knew that her chef was no ordinary man. But there was in the lunch which they now ate under a striped awning on the terrace something exquisitely countrified which he couldn't help remarking on.

"I keep a woman cook down here," said Miss Geean. "And by birth she's a countrywoman. She's got a delightful name."

"What is it?"

"Mrs. Brisket."

"She can cook?"

"Oh, yes."

"You have the art of life in your finger-tips, it seems to me."

"You know our American expression 'made over'?"

"Yes."

"Some people make over their drawing-rooms. I have made over my life. Mansfield, please bring us coffee in the summer-house."

"Yes, ma'am," said the butler.

The summer-house was hidden on a lower terrace near a pool, in which lilies were floating but which contained no goldfish.

"Goldfish don't typify romance to me," said Miss Geean.

"They only remind me of a suburban aquarium. Try that long chair."

Dale tried it and said,

"This is the most comfortable chair I have ever sat, or rather, lain in. And oh! that view! But if your coffee is supreme, as I know it's going to be, I shall feel you're a very dangerous woman."

"Why? In what way?"

"Because—" he hesitated, then went on—"because I shall feel that you are a siren calling me down the way of materialism."

"I believe in filling life with as much of charm as possible. What is ugly, badly done, second rate, unnecessary, has no attraction for me."

"Unnecessary!" he fastened on the word. "But how is one to know what is necessary and what isn't?"

What she would have answered to that question he never knew, for at this moment Mansfield turned up gently with the coffee, creating a diversion. And the coffee was, of course, supreme and probably the old brandy with it. But Dale wouldn't take any of that. He did, however, take a quite perfect cigar out of an old silver box, and then—but not till then—he felt that Miss Geean was expecting him to tell her why he had specially wanted, and just now, an hour with her. She did not say so. But he knew it. And knowing it, he said:

"May I tell you now why I wrote and asked you to give me an hour?"

"Yes. It's about Valentine, of course."

"Of course!" he echoed, not without a keen touch of sudden bitterness.

He resented the "of course" resented it terribly. But the truth was there. And the fact of his contemplating it with irony in no way changed it.

"She has a—a genius for envelopment," he said. "Thank God that most of the people one meets haven't. Otherwise life would be intolerable."

He pushed himself up on the perfect chair, gripping the flat arms.

"Miss Geean, my new play's been accepted by the management of the Central Theatre. I can't take it away. I've signed a contract. I wrote it for Valentine. She's heard it."

"I know."

"Of course. She was dining with you the day I read it to her. She says she won't stay on at the Central, that she's got other plans. Forgive me for being blunt. But I understand there's a possibility of her going into management with Mark Trever, backed by you. If she does that it's the ruin of my play. I'm a writer. I'm selfish about my work. Most writers are, I suppose. But there's another side to the matter. You know Mark Trever. You know the type of man he is. Surely you don't wish her to be in management with him."

"But why not?"

"He's such a——"

Dale pulled up. The man in him, who almost perpetually looked on at him, wouldn't tolerate the mere abuse of a jealous lover.

"Do you think such a management would really help on Valentine in her art?" he then said.

"Do you think a prolonged association with Mr. Champion would be a better thing for her?"

"Well, she calls him Caliban. That's the measure of his influence over her."

"So far."

"You surely don't think——"

Again he stopped in the middle of a sentence.

"I don't think the Central Theatre the best milieu for Valentine's talent," said Miss Geean. "It's too large. She might easily be led into exaggeration there."

"The screech in art! It would take a good deal to betray Valentine into that."

Miss Geean was silent.

"Then you want her to leave?"

"She must do what she wishes."

"But—forgive me—if you back her?"

"I'm willing to do that because I believe in her."

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"But with Trever! Surely he—don't you find him rather a commonplace man?"

"Very. He is gifted, but totally uninteresting off the stage—except perhaps as an animal."

Dale felt that he reddened.

"But surely *his* influence——"

"Do you realise this? Trever has the power—no getting away from it—to make Valentine feel, suffer."

"Do you wish her to suffer?"

"I certainly wish her to feel. An actress who doesn't feel, and feel acutely, should keep off the stage."

"Aren't you cruel?"

"But am I speaking the truth? You are a writer of plays."

There was a long silence. In it Dale rebelled, rebelled against many things. And the world in front of him was looking so lovely! The blue in the distance, where she had said Tilford Common stretched, held a fascination that seemed of Eternity. The winds were still. The white lilies slept on the glassy pool. Why rebel? Ah, but there was so much, so very much to rebel against!

"Nothing could ever make me wish misery for Valentine now," Dale said at last. "But apart from that I don't believe in this project of management with Trever. I have the feeling—it's like an instinct—that Valentine and I should stick together in art, at any rate for the present."

"But then why did you give your play to Mr. Champion without letting her know?"

"I'm afraid I acted on impulse. I don't defend it."

He looked at her, hesitating. Then he said,

"I didn't want Trever to have my play."

"I don't think you will succeed in forcing Valentine away from Trever by the means you've adopted."

This terribly straightforward remark made Dale feel very angry, but he concealed his anger, or believed he did so, and only said:

"It's a pity. For Valentine told me she was sure she could make a fortune with the play."

"She told me that too."

After a pause she added,

"Why don't you get it away from Mr. Champion?"

"He wouldn't give it up?"

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Why don't you try?"

"I know it would be useless."

As she made no comment on that, he added, after an instant:

"Besides, I chose to give it to that management. I have the right to dispose of my own play."

"Of course."

"Miss Morris can't rule everyone," he added, with almost savage abruptness.

He had now the feeling that Miss Geean was working for Valentine against him, was even perhaps working in accord with Valentine. The eternal desire of women to dominate men! But he wouldn't have it.

"Do tell me," Miss Geean's soft voice said; "what do you wish me to do? But perhaps I have guessed."

"Guessed? But really——"

"Do you want me to refuse to back Valentine in management? Is that it?"

This time Dale reddened to his temples, and, though he didn't know that, his dark and very expressive eyes stabbed at his cool, pale hostess, as she sat in the summer-house in her white dress, looking gentle, but steady and enormously self-possessed. And again he felt her wealth, felt it in a peculiar way as he had never felt wealth before. The hands in the muff were iron hands surely because that weapon of gold was in their grasp. What had she been like poor? He resented her wealth now because of the power it gave her, a power which was at this moment in opposition to his.

"I didn't come here with any intention of making such a suggestion as that," he said, "I have no right. I couldn't be so impertinent."

"I didn't think of it as that—really!" she said, very gently.

"I only wanted to talk the whole thing over with you. I know you have influence with Valentine. And—I assure you on my honour this is true—I have a premonition that if Valentine and I part just now, part company in art, I mean, it will be bad for both of us."

"That may be."

"This play of mine may not be first rate. She thinks it isn't."

"I know."

"But it does contain a marvellous part for her."

"I know that, too."

"If she doesn't act in it I'll stop it being done at all!" said Dale, coming to a sudden decision.

"But can you? Have you the power? I mean—have you got it in your contract that you can do that?"

"I have it in my contract that I can refuse to have anyone I consider unsuitable in the cast of my play."

"I may as well tell you that I'm sure Valentine wouldn't stay on in the Central now even if I refused to back her."

"I don't ask you to do that!"

"Even if I did, she would leave."

"But why? It can't be merely because of Champion."

He saw Miss Geean's eyes fixed on his.

"I don't think you know Valentine thoroughly yet," she said.

Something in Dale seemed to turn suddenly cold just then.

"It's very difficult to know anyone, woman or man, thoroughly," he murmured. "I don't pretend——" he lifted his head defiantly. "Well then, it's all up with my wretched play. That's bad enough. But I'm practically certain that if this management is arranged it won't be an artistic success."

"Tell me, why?" she said, leaning a little towards him and looking suddenly very intent.

"Because Trever is an absolutely commonplace man and Valentine is an absolutely uncommon woman. But Trever—I think I'm right in this—has a sort of masculine strength of will, a sort of brute force of will, and practically no sensitiveness. He won't consent to be ruled in management. So either he and Valentine will fight and there'll be hell in the theatre, or else she'll give in to his commonplaceness, and he'll ruin her in her art as he's——"

He stopped short.

"Sorry!" he added, in an intensely English way. "I didn't mean—but that's how I see it."

"I don't see why he should do Valentine so much harm," said Miss Geean calmly.

"Perhaps not. Anyhow there's an end of my hopes!"

"There needn't be."

"What do you mean? What outlet is there?"

"I cannot understand a man, or indeed anyone, with so much energy and so much feeling as you have—you're quite fierce, you know, at times——"

"I'm afraid I——"

"Oh, I like it. I can't understand his giving up without even joining battle. What is will for?"

"But I can't force Valentine——"

"No. I don't think you can. And I don't want you to. But why not try to overcome Caliban?"

She smiled faintly as she said the name.

"He's very large and he's very coarse and he's very brutal. That's certain. But do you think him irresistible? I don't."

"What do you suggest then? What do you advise me to do?"

"Convince him absolutely that Valentine won't stay with him, or let her convince him. Probably he still thinks she'll give in because he's got the play."

"He may."

"But when he knows she's lost to the Central Theatre?"

"Then he'll keep the play out of spite."

"Shall we try to bribe Caliban?"

As she said those words her round, soft face changed in expression slightly. Something in it suggested to Dale that for some time, before he came down that day from London, she had intended at the suitable moment to hint that she had a weapon in reserve against Caliban.

"Bribe him?"

"Yes."

"But I believe Champion's very rich."

"Oh, I don't think so. He's got some money of course. But I don't think he's so rich that he wouldn't be very glad to have more."

"You mean that——?"

"If I am to be Valentine's backer it will be to my interest to make a success of her enterprise. I shall be the business end."

"Then you want to have my play?"

"I do. Valentine's a sure judge, and she says that if she acts in it there's a fortune in it, though it isn't nearly so perfectly balanced as your play at the Central."

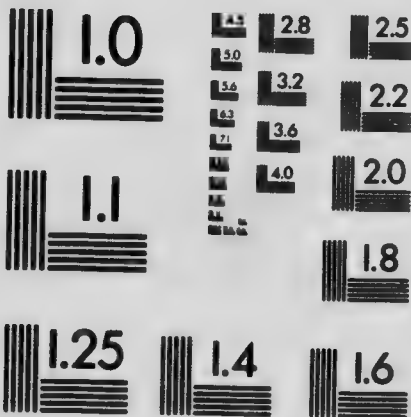
"I thought of her too much when I wrote it."

"That's what she says. But for that very reason she could shine in that play as she has never shone before. Force of will backed by force of gold—men still think of money as gold, because they are romantics underneath—can carry through



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most things. Caliban's probably nothing but an enormous creature of straw."

"Ah! And what am I?" Dale suddenly cried out to himself.

Force of will! He recognised that in his companion, and it was being directed steadily on him. He had made up his mind that he wouldn't give his play to Mark Trever. Because of that he had made it over to Champion and Grant. But now this quiet woman, with the pale hair and the soft, useless-looking hands, was intending him to do what he had resolved not to do, what, moreover, she knew he had resolved not to do. Antagonism against her woke up in him. Hadn't she and Valentine talked the whole thing over? Hadn't they, perhaps, decided in conference how it would be best to act? Didn't they probably, in their supreme feminine self-confidence, see all men as creatures, small or great, of straw? Or didn't she—his hostess? For Valentine surely couldn't think of Trever as that.

"He may be," Dale said.

"Well, then?"

"But you've forgotten that I don't wish my play to go to Trever."

"Why? Do you dislike him so much that you would rather not have your play produced than have him act in it?"

"Trever's always been very decent to me. But it just simply comes to this, dear Miss Geean, that I don't choose to hand my play over to him if he goes into management with Valentine."

"If that is so, then the whole matter resolves itself into a battle of wills," she said, with her faint smile. "Your will against Valentine's."

He managed to smile, too, as he said:

"Valentine's will being reinforced by your will and Mark Trever's."

He saw by a look in her eyes that she knew he understood her at that moment, and he had an odd feeling that respect for him dawned in her.

"I wonder why you are in favour of Mark Trever," he said.

"My real reason isn't a very subtle one. It is simply this: that I believe Valentine and Trever in combination, and in the right play would be the biggest draw in London just now."

"Oh!" he said.

And there was a strange note of disappointment, disillusion—something like that—in his voice.

"Why should I wish to back a failure?"

"Of course you wouldn't! Well, I'm afraid I was right. There's no outlet from this *impasse*."

"Shall we go for a stroll on the Common?"

"Delighted!"

"I'll tell them to let out the dogs."

"The dogs" proved to be three marvellous Russian deerhounds. No mixture of breeds in them! The stroll on the Common developed into a walk of an hour and a half. When they came back it was tea-time, and some people had come down by car from London: a well-known American actress making holiday in England, a famous English General, an almost equally famous English politician, the art critic of one of the big London Dailies, and an extraordinarily handsome, dark young man, quite possibly an Armenian, who told Dale that he lived "at Monte Carlo, Deauville, Paris and Biarritz."

There was no more intimate talk between Miss Geean and Dale that day. But even on the Common they had discussed general topics. Both of them had instinctively realised that the theatre-talk was over.

CHAPTER XXIII

DALE drove home after dinner that night feeling that his visit had been a failure. What he had expected to come of it he now hardly knew. But nothing had come of it. Valentine would leave the Central Theatre at the end of the run of his play, some time in July. She would go into management with Trever backed by Miss Geean's money. She might succeed in the new enterprise or she might fail. In either case, her association with him, Dale, who had found her, who had brought her into the light of success, who now was so unfortunate as to love her, would be broken. It would be broken, for she would inevitably be drawn much closer to Trever. He had been her lover. He was the father of her child. If he went into management with her, that would be a

new conquering of her by him, a more triumphant conquering than had been the first one. For in the beginning she must have had illusions. Now she had none. And a fascination which persists even when all illusions are stripped away from the victim of it may well be confident of its power. Dale knew that such a change of conditions as he was now forced to anticipate would mean the inevitable drifting away from him of Valentine. As the motor rolled towards London through the darkness of the Surrey lanes he felt horribly lonely, deserted and sad.

But he wouldn't give in. He wouldn't do what Miss Geean wanted him to do, what no doubt Valentine wanted him to do. He would rather be sad and lonely than be a puppet, even though he were a puppet in the hands of one he loved. And since he had been at the White House he had a serious longing to act in defiance of the will of the woman who lived there. She was certainly accustomed to dominate. He was now positive of that. She must have been born with a will of iron, and the successful use of it had given her tremendous self-confidence. Possibly even now she was expectant of a complete giving in on his part. She had seemed to take his assertion about the play, his second assertion, quite seriously. She had dropped the subject as if there were no more to be said, or done about it. But it didn't follow from that that she had given up all hope of bending him to her desire. He believed that she was one of those women who think that any man can be overcome by a sufficiently persistent woman. He wondered exactly how she had "made over" her life. Anyhow, she wasn't going to make over his.

On the following day Dale yielded to an impulse which suddenly attacked him. He packed up a couple of suit-cases, cancelled all his engagements, caught an afternoon train to Dover, and crossed by the night boat to Paris. From there he went on to Switzerland.

He knew it was a flight, and he was ashamed of it. But he was too unhappy in London now. The place had suddenly become hateful to him. And he was afraid of somebody—of the author whom he contained within him, and who might—mightn't he?—let the male man in him down, of the writing creature within him who clamoured for Valentine the actress even as the male man clamoured for Valentine the woman. The man had his pride. But the writing creature? Dale was afraid of him. He might grow soft. He needed Valentine so

desperately to complete what he had wrought at. That was pitiful, and disgusting, too. And so Dale fled.

Macfarlane would send on all letters. Dale had very nearly decided to leave no address even with Macfarlane. But that seemed too cowardly. Besides, he owed it to Champion and Grant to leave his address. They might want him. They would probably want him soon. But he wouldn't go back till he chose to. He wouldn't be dragged back. Now that the Valentine business was done with they could put on another play for the autumn season. His play wouldn't have a chance unless she appeared in it. Let it gather a coating of dust in a pigeon-hole. That was the suitable fate for it now. It was that hateful thing, a star play. And now the star wouldn't be in it. So it was worth nothing. He thought he was ashamed of it. He said to himself that he would try to forget it. He had had his lesson. He had betrayed the artist in him for a woman. He had deserved to be punished. And now he was punished. Let there be an end of it.

In that violent mood, uselessly running away from the ordained, he went up into the mountains—and hated them, and he came down into the valleys and was encompassed by their melancholy. He tried French Switzerland, and it would not do, and Italian Switzerland, and it would not do. And, finally, he sought German Switzerland. Letters, of course, had followed him. But Valentine had not written. He had not expected her to write. Nevertheless, he was profoundly disappointed because no letter came from her, and found her silence cruel. She was cruel—a cruel woman. He had fallen in love with a cruel woman. Could anything be more disastrous? His secret irony embittered him. He laughed at himself, and saw himself as ridiculous and contemptible. And it was terribly painful to be made to realise so soon that, to the man with a heart, the success of his talent is not only not enough to make life sweet, but not even enough to make life tolerable while the heart is unsatisfied.

A cable told him that the play Valentine was still acting in would be produced in New York in September at a big theatre with a star cast. He didn't care. Another cable asked him to go over to America for the rehearsals. He cabled that he couldn't. He had never promised to go. But he had thought of going. Now the idea was loathsome to him.

Money, of course, was still coming into his bank, though the stream was diminishing in volume. But there was good reason for expecting that the play would earn much more in America than in England. (This expectation proved to be well founded later.) Yet what was the good of it all? Dale was miserable, a miserable and ridiculous square-built man, short, stocky and desperately lonely, hanging about in large Swiss hotels, going for aimless walks, going on lakes in big steamers, riding in Funicular railways, lunching at "points of view," patting the heads of St. Bernard dogs near the snow line, climbing, squatting, wondering why.

Presently a telegram reached him from Macfarlane :

"Mr. Champion most anxious know your address may I give it Macfarlane."

Dale had told Macfarlane not to give any address, but merely to send on all communications. Now he hesitated. He had a strange, unreasonable desire to remain in hiding. But his eternal critic said: "Don't be such a fool!" And he wired to Macfarlane to give his address to Champion.

By this time he had collapsed in the Schweitzerhof at Lucerne, where he was leading for the moment an entirely aimless life. The high season at Lucerne was only beginning. The staring multitudes with cheap tickets hadn't yet arrived. But there were a good many motoring Americans, and there were, of course, some elderly English women floating about in veils near the tea-rooms.

After wiring to Macfarlane—he sent the telegram himself from the Post Office—Dale went vaguely about the town, and was returning to the shady avenue at the lake edge when his eyes were attracted to a notice of some kind pasted on a wall close to the entrance to a sanctum defined as "English tea-rooms—scones here." He went up to the wall and read the announcement of an organ recital to be given that day in the Cathedral at five o'clock. The programme was printed. The last item on it was "The Storm."

Dale looked at his watch. It was nearly five. Why not go to hear "The Storm"? He had never heard the great organ of Lucerne.

When he went into the Cathedral the recital had just begun, and he sat down at the back near the door. There were not

many people in the building, certainly less than a hundred. They were scattered about in small groups. Most of them were women. Dale counted only eight men, all middle-aged. Why was he there? This sort of thing couldn't go on. But now he would hear from Champion. Something would happen. A claw would dart out from theatre-land. He would feel a pull from London, a pull from the vast Central Theatre.

The organist was playing a fugue of Bach, beginning classically to excuse the sensational fireworks which he had in view to *épater les bourgeois* later on. And while Dale thought of the theatre, with which his life was probably destined to be closely linked for many years to come, waves of ecclesiasticism seemed flowing over him. He was thinking Theatre. But he was feeling something surely opposed to his thought. And presently he was fully conscious of that. The Theatre and the Church! He had been thinking the one and feeling the other. So inevitably does the organ suggest to the heart of the average man religion in its various forms that Dale was now aware of competition. It was as if, for the moment, the Theatre was being attacked by the Church, as if the Church were trying to oust the Theatre from its prominent place in his life. And he remembered some words in his diary, written about himself: "No religious belief, yet no capacity for being satisfied in the full sense of the term by what are generally called worldly things." How appallingly true those words were, and what a cruel fact they expressed! For a moment, always influenced by sound, Dale tried to imagine himself a man of the Church, no longer a man of the Theatre. Suppose, instead of being a writer of plays, a seeker after actors and actresses, a power run after by managers, he were a clergyman, or a priest? Suppose instead of going to rehearsals it were his duty to conduct services, to say Mass, to mount up into a pulpit and preach? Suppose he confessed women instead of telling them exactly how he wished love scenes to be played, or scenes of violence, of satire, of comedy? Suppose instead of trying to reproduce life in art he were concentrated upon what supposedly lay beyond life—upon after life? Celibacy! How very extraordinary that any man should be ready deliberately to vow himself to celibacy, with the intention probably of keeping that vow. And then other words of his diary came up in Dale's mind, also written about himself: "sensual, but often angry at being so."

Why was he angry because he was sensual?

The storm was terribly sensational. It was remarkable, but as he listened Dale pitied the organ, as he had sometimes pitied performing cats in a circus or at a music-hall. An instrument can be outraged as well as an animal. He was glad when the roarings and the patterings died away, and the audience, probably stupefied, began to move.

Just before he left his seat, Dale, who was standing up, saw a rather burly man in black step into the aisle, kneel for a moment facing the distant altar, then turn round and come towards him.

"A priest!" he thought. "One of those strange men who make extraordinary vows! And keep them?"

Then he, too, stepped into the aisle, turned and walked towards the door.

As he walked he found that he was intensely conscious of the priest behind him. He wondered why that was. When he reached the door and was outside the Cathedral at the top of the flight of steps, his consciousness of the priest kept him standing. He felt that he must see what manner of man this priest was. He waited, and in an instant saw Father Bexland pass by him and go down the steps, evidently without noticing him sufficiently to remember who he was.

Father Bexland out here, the priest of whom Valentine had said: "I love this man!" For a moment Dale felt an odd, delicious nearness to Valentine, as if something of Valentine must be there with the man who was her friend, even her great friend.

"But I must speak to him!" Dale said to himself. And he followed quickly down the steps, and soon caught up the priest, who was walking, with a sort of slow sturdiness, towards the sheltered avenue by the lake.

"Father Bexland!"

The priest stopped and turned round.

"Don't you remember me? I met you at Miss Morris's, in London. I'm Dale. Miss Morris is acting in my play."

"Oh—Mr. Dale!" The priest held out his hand cordially.

"Did I pass you? Were you in the Cathedral?"

"Yes. You passed me at the top of the steps."

"I suppose I was full of the music."

"Of the storm?"

"No. I didn't like that. Spurious stuff. Clever in a

sensational way, no doubt. But I hate to hear a fine organ put to such uses."

"So do I. Are you here for long? (May I walk with you?)"

"Of course. I'm here for another week. I'm having a fortnight's holiday. I was rather overworked, holding Missions in the North. The doctor said I must pull up for a short time. But I'm not at all ill. I saw our friend as I passed through."

"How is she?" said Dale, trying not to sound too eager.

The priest seemed to hesitate.

"How is she? Very successful, I imagine, very, very successful, both on the stage and off. She has had a great triumph."

There was no slightest sound of sarcasm in his voice, and yet Dale received the impression that such a triumph as Valentine's counted for very little in the Father's estimation.

"And so have you, Mr. Dale. I know very little about theatrical affairs now, and I never visit a theatre. But I meet a good many people, and I realise what is thought of your talent. It's a great thing to have a gift such as you evidently have. I wish you well with it. And I wish others well through it. A great deal can be done with such a gift as yours, a great deal for humanity."

"Perhaps I—I hope I shan't prostitute it."

"I should hope not indeed."

The steady, abnormally sincere eyes were fixed upon Dale.

"I don't think you're the man to do that."

"I don't know. Success has its victims, you know, as well as failure. D'you think she is happy?"

"Perhaps our friend hardly gives herself the time to be happy. Have you ever seen surf bathing on those far-off seas where there are gigantic rollers?"

"No, never."

"It is rather like perpetual surf bathing with her just now, I believe. But that may pass. She's so genuine, so genuine. And all genuine people feel the need of calm at certain times. It's like bread to them, bread for the spirit."

"I say," said Dale, with his characteristic abruptness, "I'm staying at the Schweitzerhof. Are you, by any chance?"

"Oh, no. That's too expensive for me. I'm at the Swan Pension."

"Won't you come and dine with me to-night? I should like to know you better if you don't mind. And I'm alone here."

"Having a holiday from success?"

"Oh—success! But anyhow I suppose it is better than failure, much better. Will you come? At eight o'clock?"

"Yes. It's kind of you. I will."

"I'll leave you now."

Dale gripped the Father's hand and turned away. They were exactly opposite to the Schweitzerhof. As he went into the hotel he thought:

"Having a holiday from success! By Jove, I am doing that!"

He was encompassed by a terribly definite feeling of failure. During dinner, and afterwards when they sat in a corner of the hall happily remote from coffee and liqueur-drinking humanity, Dale realised why Valentine was fond of Father Bexland. He was a fiery man of God, not the least aggressive, not pugnacious, but not soft, not sweet, not at all like honey in the honeycomb. There was in him a burning quality that made itself very definitely felt, and that looked out of his eyes seen as a flame may be seen through a window. "In that house there is a big fire always burning!" Dale said that to himself many times that evening. Valentine had said that before becoming a priest Father Bexland had been a guardsman, and that he had had to "disentangle himself from women." But it wasn't that statement which made Dale know that in the life of his companion there had been a great fight, and that at one time he must certainly have lived quite fully as a male. No; it was something subtle, yet definite, in the man himself, which proclaimed to Dale a past not celibate. And Dale knew that he was with a great lover of God who had once been a great lover of God's handiwork in the true, everlasting man's way. Yet the purity in the Father now was as evident as the fire. Here was no unfortunate dedicated creature engaged in a dreadful scrambling fight with the flesh. The struggle was quite over, and perhaps long ago. But it had left behind it a sediment of knowledge. Life had laid hands on this man. But now he had risen above that part of Life which is not torch but net. He was disentangled utterly; but Dale felt that he had been entangled. If he was a guide now he was a guide who knew the way out because he had been inside and had had to find the way out for himself. And Dale had the

thought : " It's better to be released than never to have been captive, because you can understand all the captives."

" Valentine is very fond of you," Dale said, towards the end of the evening.

" Now and then," said Father Bexland with a smile.

" Always, I'm sure."

" When she has time to think of me."

" Her life is crowded, I know. She goes so much into society. I think that's a pity. It must tire her. And if she's to become a great artist and remain one, she mustn't be tired."

" She tells me she has starved all her life, and must eat now."

" I want her to live for her art," said Dale, perhaps rather disingenuously. " At least I—perhaps that's not entirely true. But society pulls people to bits, I think, more often than not."

" Has it ever struck you that our friend is not wholly actress ? " asked Father Bexland.

" What do you mean exactly by that ? I may know, but I wish you would tell me."

" In meeting very successful and sometimes very celebrated people I have often had the impression of vocation, of dedication. I've said to myself : ' Yes, this man was born to be a painter, or a politician, perhaps, or a business man. He could never have been anything else.' To give you an illustration : I once met Pachmanse, the pianist, in Birmingham. My feeling about him was : ' This man was created to play Chopin.' "

" I know exactly what you mean."

" And I have met women who obviously belonged to their professions, who were utterly identified with them. Once I was permitted to meet Madame Bernhardt. She seemed to me to be wholly and entirely a marvellous creature of the theatre. I felt that her soul was in the theatre even more perpetually than her body. Now I don't feel that about Miss Morris. I could even imagine her some day giving the theatre up."

" Oh, I hope she won't ! " Dale exclaimed.

Father Bexland smiled.

" There are other things in life."

" Of course ! Don't think me one of those one-sided fanatics who prefer a mimicry of life to life itself. It's only that I feel Miss Morris to be so gifted as an actress that I want her to give

herself wholly to her art, and to reach not only the half-way house—the hut you know where one sleeps—but the peaks from which one looks down on the world. She ought to drop society. She ought to concentrate completely. Oh, if only she were free of all entanglements ! ”

Directly he had said that Dale was conscious of a feeling of guilt, and looked down.

“ Some day she may be,” said Father Bexland. “ She is young. She is triumphant. She gives out an abnormal amount of influence. For many years she lived a shabby life, a life down at heel. She has described it to me. I know well the life led by the very poor, those quite at the bottom. But that shabby theatrical life on the road, homeless, often a dark muddle of nomadic immorality ! I’d rather be very poor and toil in a slum than live it, I think.”

He got up.

“ But I haven’t got the theatre in my blood ! ”

“ Surely she has ! ”

“ Many other things as well.”

“ May I see you again ? ”

“ To-morrow I’m making an excursion. Will you come to dine at my Pension—Pension Swan—the day after ? Decent food. Not like the food here though.”

“ Oh, please—I’ll come with pleasure.”

“ And I’m sorry to say we dine at seven.”

“ I’ll come at seven,” said Dale eagerly.

But it wasn’t to be.

On the following day Dale received this telegram : Coming out to see you arrive to-morrow, Wednesday.—Champion.

“ Damn ! ” said Dale. “ Damnation take the fellow ! ”

He stared at the beastly bit of paper. Champion out here ! To be saddled with Champion ! To have no relief from Champion ! Switzerland with Champion ! Ah, and the dinner at the Pension Swan !

“ But I’ll go all the same ! ” Dale said savagely to himself.

“ I won’t break my engagement. I didn’t ask Caliban to come. I didn’t ask Caliban to come. He can dine alone.”

Caliban ! What did he want ? Dale was absolutely certain that whatever Caliban wanted, it was something which he, Dale, would hate. Of course he was coming about the play, about Valentine. Already Dale was in strong opposition to the (unknown) desires and intentions of the manager.

And he was never at ease with Champion ; Champion dried him up ; Champion paralysed him ; Champion took all the stuffing out of him.

" Now then, boy ! " How he hated being called " boy " by Champion.

" Why the devil did I make my play over to him ? " Dale asked himself despairingly. " Caliban ! "

CHAPTER XXIV

DALE had always been aware of something vulgarly powerful in Champion. He was struck by it afresh in Switzerland. It wasn't only that the manager was very large in body and face. There was something else large in him, something of character, which made for a certain impressiveness of which Dale was fully aware. He never shrank under his own vulgarity. It was difficult to find a flaw in his self-possession. The granitic look in his face was surely matched by something granitic in his temperament. He hadn't got to Park Lane by giving in. That was certain.

" Hulloh ! " was his greeting to Dale. " What did you run away for ? "

" Run away ? "

" Well, didn't you ? D'you know what month it is ? "

" Of course I do—July."

" Yes, the third of July. What about autumn seasons ? "

" I can't always stick in London."

" Well, anyhow, I've run you to earth. I must go and get a bath now. We'll have a good talk at dinner."

" But I'm awfully sorry I'm dining out."

A look Dale knew very well came into the manager's face. It was hard, combative and very alert.

" Now, Dale, is this playing the game ? " he said.

" But I didn't know you were coming."

" Is she damned good-looking ? "

" What d'you mean ? I'm dining with a priest."

" With a what ? "

" I'm dining with a Roman Catholic Priest."

" Black petticoats! Here? "

" No, in the Pension Swan."

" Dining with a priest in a pension! Boy, you must throw the Reverend Father over. I haven't travelled all the way from London to have a sky pilot pass me at the post. I'll be down here for cocktails at eight sharp."

And without waiting to hear what Dale had got to say he got into the lift and Dale saw his big back disappear towards the upper regions.

After standing for a moment in angry consideration Dale's pale face was altered by a smile. And the smile persisted as he walked quickly to the telephone.

That evening when, at eight sharp, Champion came down in the lift for cocktails, he found Dale waiting for him in the company of a priest.

" My friend, Father Bexland," Dale said. " Father, this is Mr. Champion who gave me my great chance at the Central Theatre. He manages it with Mr. Grant."

" Glad to meet you," said Champion, putting forth a big hand, and showing no surprise.

" Father Bexland is a great friend of Miss Morris."

" Really! " said Champion, staring at the Father with his dissipated eyes. " Is Miss Morris a Catholic? "

" Yes," said Father Bexland.

Dale was startled by this piece of news.

" I had no idea——" he said, and broke off.

" Miss Morris's mother is Irish, and brought her up in the Catholic faith," said Father Bexland.

" Irish! " said Champion. " Ah! "

He paused, still staring. Then:

" Let's have dry martinis," he said. " And go right in to dinner."

He glanced at Dale.

" And we'll talk theatre to the Father. If he's Miss Morris's friend it'll be all right, eh? "

He broke into a laugh that sounded heavy.

" I can't talk Church. Don't know how to! You've fallen among the unregenerate to-night, Father. Make no mistake about it."

" You can't talk Church, and I don't know that I can talk theatre—of to-day."

" Can you of yesterday then? "

"I think so. I used to be a soldier, and went often to the theatre."

"The deuce you were! What regiment?"

"I was in the Grenadier Guards."

"My God though! Were you? Dale, we're going to have a lively dinner to-night!"

Dale realised that Champion had taken an abrupt, thorough liking to Father Bexland.

"You thought you'd punish me to-night for keeping you from your Pension Swan, my boy, didn't you?" said Champion to Dale at eleven o'clock that night. "But you never made a greater mistake. I got on better with old Bexland than you did. That chap knows life. An ex-Grenadier Guardsman! And he can talk, too. I'll get him into the theatre again yet. You wait! Waiter, bring us two double whiskies. Have another cigar, Dale. Come along now! You and me've got to sit up for another two hours or more. You put it across me at dinner—and I'm glad you did—but I'm going to put it across you now. Let's get into this corner. Light up!"

There was something really jovial in Champion's manner at that moment, and the smile on his large face had something of genuine geniality. But a change came over him a few minutes later, when the waiter had brought them their drinks and gone away.

"Fact is," he said. "That friend of yours has a way with him. Makes you switch off from all the damned nuisance of life for the moment, makes you think there's other things besides the juice you're stewing in. But I haven't come out here to hand about roses. It's settled. Val Morris is leaving us. She opens at the London Playhouse with Trever in September. And all Carrie Geean's money's behind them. What d'you say to that?"

After an instant of silence, Dale said, in a steady voice:

"It's only what I expected."

"Well, anyhow, they can look about for a play. They haven't got yours. But if they haven't, it isn't for want of trying."

"Trying! What do you mean?"

"Mean! I mean that Carrie Geean's been after us to buy it away ever since you've been rollicking about on the Continent enjoying yourself."

"The play couldn't go to any other management without my consent," said Dale, firmly.

"And, anyhow, d'you think I'd give it up? Not for twenty thousand! Not for thirty thousand!"

"Surely Miss Morris didn't know——"

"I don't know what Val Morris knew and what she didn't know. I never spoke to her about it. And if I had, being a woman, she'd have told me a lie. It was Carrie Geean who was pulling the strings. Believe me, Dale, old Carrie's some business woman."

After a silence Dale said:

"What are you going to do now?"

"That's what I've come all the way here to talk about."

He turned his cigar about between his large lips, took a drink of whisky, glanced at Dale, glanced away. There was something furtive in his deeply-sunken eyes.

"We close the present season on July the twenty-ninth," he said.

"Not till then?"

"No. Your play's got a wonderful amount of stamina. We might almost have run it on. But we've decided to close. We intend to reopen early on in September if possible. As you know, we'd scheduled your new play as our next piece. The public is very fond of you just at present, Master Dale."

"I've been very lucky."

"It isn't that. You wrote a damned good play. That accounts for your luck. Grant and I think a lot of you."

"We've all done well with the play."

"And Val Morris better than any of us. But now about the future."

Again he turned his cigar round and round.

"Looking ahead," he observed slowly, "we have made two or three important engagements. To supply Miss Morris's place we've signed with Maud Eden. She's a big draw."

"I believe she is."

"A very big draw. We've had your play read to her."

Dale's pale face grew scarlet. Ridiculously he felt for an instant as if the reading of his play to any other woman than Valentine was like an indecent exposure. Champion's hard, shrewd eyes were fixed upon him. They still held a furtive look.

"She's mad about it, says the woman's part's the best she's ever come across. What d'you think of that?"

"Of course I'm glad Miss Eden likes it," said Dale, rigidly.

"She says it's a better part than Sarah ever had written for her by Sardou. That's praise, eh?"

"Very good of her!" muttered Dale.

"She's crazy to play it."

"Is she?"

"She is. So I've travelled all the way out here to get your consent. I promised Miss Eden I'd find you and do my damndest to get you to say yes right away, so we can go right ahead with rehearsals. She saw me off on the boat. By the way, she sends you her love, boy."

"Very good of her! But I don't know her. I've only bowed to her once, that day at *Ciro's*."

"Well, anyhow, she loves the new play. Let's leave it at that. Now what do you say?"

Directly Champion had told Dale this piece of news about Miss Eden's ardent wish to act the part he had written for Valentine, Dale had had an impulse which he had controlled. The impulse had been to say at once, "I shall never let Miss Eden appear in my new piece." The reason which had induced him not to say that, to control his tongue, lay in Champion. Something in Champion, something in his look, in his manner, even in the sound of his slightly hoarse voice—the voice of a not healthy man—warned Dale that the manager was masking his batteries, or trying to mask them. Apparently he was being quite frank, quite direct. He had engaged Maud Eden as leading woman. He had had Dale's play, scheduled as the next production at the Central Theatre, read to her. She was delighted with it, and eager to act in it. And so Champion had travelled out to Dale to obtain his consent, necessitated by a clause in the author's contract. Could anything be simpler, more above board? And yet Dale was positive that there was something in Champion's mind which he intended to conceal, and that it was something connected with this business of Maud Eden and the new piece. Champion was acting a part. Why? What was he up to? The doubt, the question in Dale's mind, kept him from saying the obvious thing.

"Well, that requires thinking over," Dale said, after a moment of not badly acted hesitation.

"What more can you want? Maud Eden's a pretty little thing. Some people call her lovely. She's a good actress, popular, got a damned big following, especially among the *matinée* girls and the smart boys. But really pretty near

everyone likes her. She loves the part. We want to put the play on at once. She'll act for all she's worth. You can take it from me. I swore to her I'd go back with your consent in my pocket. Now then, boy!"

Again the big cigar went round and round between the big lips, and the sunken eyes looked sharply out between the pouches and wrinkles that surrounded them.

"It might be a wise move," Dale said slowly.

Was it his imagination that deceived him just then? Or did Champion's large face show a flicker of disappointment?

"A wise move, boy! You've hit it. We've got to punish Val Morris for leaving us, and that swine, Mark Trever, too."

There was no acting in the vicious intensity which drove out the last four words.

"Why is Trever a swine?"

"Why? Hasn't he engineered the whole thing?"

"How do we know?"

"How do we know? My boy, you can write a damned good play, but you're an innocent for all that. Trever's been playing up for this ever since he realised Val Morris's success with the public. He made up his mind to get her, and he's got her. And by the old everlasting stunt! Bah!"

He swung round as if looking for a spittoon. Of course he didn't find one, and swallowed.

"What stunt?"

"My God, boy, where are your eyes? He's been making love to her, of course. And she's been fool enough to tumble to it."

Champion was being genuine now. No doubt of that! Then where was the need of the subtlety which Dale knew he was at work?

"We've got to punish Trever, you and me."

"I really see no reason for that," said Dale, with frosty indifference in his voice, and, he hoped, in his manner. "I didn't write my play to use it as a punishment, as a weapon."

"Oh, you're too damned gentlemanly and good-natured. You should just see Carrie Geean at work. I'll swear with all her money and all her charming ways she came out of the gutter. Now, Dale, I'll lay my cards on the table"—the consecrated phrase heard at Ciro's.—"This is how I figure it

out. We've been treated damned badly, Grant, you and I. And I tell you frankly I'm not going to take it lying down. There's really no actress in London can play the part you've written as it should be played except Val Morris. But we've got to bring the play out just to show her and Trever we can do without 'em. Maud Eden's not made for the part. I didn't tell her that, but I don't mind telling it to you. She's not made for the part, but she can get away with it if we have someone in to train her, teach her every gesture, give her every inflection of the voice, and all that sort of thing. We'll *make* her act it one way or another. It can be done. And, anyhow, Val Morris'll know we aren't keeping the play back because no one can play it but her. See? I'll get my own back on those two if I have to——"

"Not by means of my play really!" Dale couldn't help exclaiming at this point.

Directly he had said it he knew that the writing creature had got the better of the man who looked on, and who was more subtle than he was.

"What's that you say?" said Champion sharply.

Dale had a terribly definite feeling that he was playing into Champion's hands, was doing exactly what Champion had planned that he should do, had made certain that he would do, when he had said good-bye to Maud Eden on the Pier at Dover. He had more than a feeling that this was so. He knew that it was so. But he couldn't go on with the game. He was, as on so many occasions during the preparation of his play at the Central Theatre, shivering inside with disgust.

"It's no use talking, Champion. We must keep back the play."

"Keep it back? What for?"

"God knows! For nothing probably. But I can't have it ruined."

"Ruined! I tell you we'll get in someone who'll *make* Mand Eden——"

"Nobody on earth could make Miss Eden play that part properly."

"Now look here, Dale——"

"I can't consent, Champion. I'm sorry. But Miss Eden, with the best intentions, could only ruin that part."

"Why the hell have you got such a down on Miss Eden?"

"I haven't got a down on her—as you call it. But I wrote that part for Miss Morris, and you yourself said no one could play it but Miss Morris."

"Get along with you!"

"You did."

"Well, and now I've promised Miss Eden that——"

"I refuse, Champion. Sorry! But I refuse."

"Well, of all the obstinate——"

"I can't help it. You'll never change me," said Dale.

And the really clever and really observant man within him said:

"And you'll never want to change me—in that respect!"

"And you mean to tell me I've come all this way for nothing!"

Dale very nearly made answer:

"No, you've come all this way and got exactly what you intended to get."

He longed to say that, to plant that blow between the eyes, and see the huge man blink, longed to prove that he was not the fool he was thought to be. But he resisted the temptation.

"Don't say that," he replied. "You've met Father Bexland, and to-morrow you'll see Lucerne."

"Good God! Think I've never seen Lucerne before?"

"Well, then you can see it again."

"I don't think! If I can't get you to change your mind I'm off to Paris by the twelve o'clock train to-morrow. Waiter! Another double whisky! And put more ice in it this time."

Champion did catch the twelve o'clock train to Paris on the following morning. His last words to Dale were:

"You've put me in the soup, my boy, I can tell you! What the devil am I going to say to Miss Eden?"

But when the train drew out of Lucerne station he was smiling.

"Extraordinary what damned fools clever men are!" he said to himself as he lit a cigar.

CHAPTER XXV

DALE travelled back to England with Father Bexland, of whom he had seen a great deal after Champion's departure. He had longed to give his complete confidence to the Father, but he had not given it. A feeling of delicacy had held him in reserve. Father Bexland was having a short holiday. He had been working too hard. And his work, Dale guessed, led him often to the sad places where men wrestled with their troubles and women groaned beneath the burden of life. There was a rock-like sincerity in him, combined with a warmth of sympathy born out of knowledge of the world, which must lead many people to his door. And now he was having a holiday. Dale refrained. And perhaps it was that refraining which won him Father Bexland's friendship. For they came back to England friends.

When the time came for good-byes, Dale said :

" I wish you lived in London. But perhaps it's as well you don't."

" Why ? "

" If you did I might be tempted to treat you as my Father Confessor, although I'm not a Catholic. And I'm sure you must often be tired of shouldering other people's burdens."

" I would far rather hear what you had to tell me than listen, as I too often do, to the ramblings of poor, dear, semi-idiotic souls clamouring after pardon for imaginary sins, sins they haven't had the energy to commit. There's one old woman—ah well, poor old soul ! "

He stopped, smiling.

" Poor old wretch ! I'm afraid I've sometimes found myself wishing she would commit a real thoroughgoing crime just for once, to brisk things up. But she won't. She hasn't got the spirit for it."

Dale smiled, too.

" Virtue born out of anæmia ! I know."

He gripped the Father's hand.

" I shall be glad when I can see you again."

And then Father Bexland drove off to pay a visit to Valentine before going on to Paddington Station.

A visit to Valentine !

Dale felt a desperate need of Valentine, but the thought of Trever prevented him from going to see her. His critical faculty governed him. It would be undignified to hurry to a woman who knew his feelings for her but didn't need him at all. She had chosen to sever herself from him. (He now considered her departure from the Central Theatre as a severance.) He had found her, believed in her. Through him she had at last got the chance for which so many talented people have to wait and wait till hope dies down in them, and even ambition almost withers away. His belief in her, leading to action, had brought her into the light. And now she had deserted him. That was how he saw it. She had deserted him, because of her inexplicable passion for a handsome animal, gifted—one must allow that—but apart from his gift thoroughly commonplace; she had deserted him for a man who didn't love her, who had abandoned her long ago, and had only returned to her for reasons so sordid that Dale tingled with disgust when he thought of them.

He couldn't hurry to Wilton Crescent. Indeed, after "thinking things over," he decided not to go there again unless he met Valentine by chance, and she asked him to go, or unless she wrote to him. Meanwhile he would lead his life without her. She was lost to him. He must get accustomed to that.

He didn't meet Valentine by chance. She didn't write to him. After the twenty-ninth of July his play was taken off at the Central. He didn't go to the last performance. In order to avoid the necessity of doing that he left London during the last week of the run, and went up North to stay with some friends in Lancashire. From there he wrote to Grant asking him to thank the Company on the author's behalf, to say how deeply grateful he was to them all for their loyal efforts, which had been rewarded with such an exceptional success. He knew that Grant would have his letter pinned on the board in the stage-doorkeeper's office. No doubt Valentine would see it.

While he was in Lancashire he got a note from Mrs. Sartoris, asking him to pay her a visit at Sharnley Green in Surrey, when he had some time to spare. She would be there through the whole of August and September. During the second week in August he went there and found her alone. Her husband had already gone up North for grouse shooting.

When Dale arrived at Sharnley Green Cottage, and had

been warmly greeted by his hostess, who, casual though she was, could be cordial in her naturally off-hand way, she said to him:

"Have you seen the *Daily Telegraph* Thursday column?"

"D'you mean the theatrical column? No. I've only seen *The Times* to-day. Any interesting news?"

He spoke carelessly but his dark eyes were intent.

"Two bits of news," she said.

"About Miss Morris, I suppose?"

"Yes, and about the Central Theatre, too."

She went to a table in the drawing-room.

"Here it is."

Dale took the paper, and stood quite still for a moment reading.

"A new play by Constantine!" he said, looking up.

"Yes. What do you think of that?"

"Well, he's young, clever in a flashy sort of way, popular with the public."

"That's all true. But I hate his work. It's so glittering but so spurious. And it's always on the outside edge, not because the author dives deep into life and must show ugly, but perhaps basic, truths, but because he wants to catch a certain class. I call it the dust-bin class."

Dale smiled.

"Not a bad name!"

"I wish Valentine hadn't."

"Hadh't—what?"

"Gone into this management. At this early stage of her London career she can't be too careful."

"D'you see her often?"

"Fairly often. But she's wildly social now, and wildly extravagant, too. She never talks to me about money matters. But I know she's up to her eyes in debt. She lives as if she had ten or twelve thousand a year. I can't help being very sorry now that she's such a success in Society. And she dances perpetually, after the theatre."

"Well, she can't be dancing now surely."

"No. The season's quite over. But she never rests. Now of course she's rehearsing and—managing."

"She's joint director with Mark Trever."

"Yes, the greatest mistake. She's totally unfit for management. She's an artist."

"Champion thinks she's a very sharp business woman, too."

"Champion!"

Mrs. Sartoris's turquoise blue eyes looked cold, even stony.

"Have you read the second paragraph?"

"No."

Dale read on.

"An Indian play written in collaboration by Frank Arnold and Lucien Drouet at the Central Theatre! I never heard of Frank Arnold before. But Drouet has written some very clever French plays. He speaks English perfectly. I've met him once or twice. I hope they have a success."

"And your play?"

"Shelved for the time, perhaps for ever."

He put the paper down.

"I think I'll go out to America and look after the production of my Central Theatre piece there."

"Can you tear yourself away without seeing how Valentine gets on in her new venture?"

"Why not? I'm out of her life now."

"It's all a great pity, I think."

"Oh, I don't know. She stands to make more money in management than in working on a salary."

"Money! Money! If she begins to grab after money she's lost. I'm unhappy about her."

"Are you fond of her?"

"Yes. But she's incalculable. And I think she's in with the wrong people."

"Don't you like Trever?"

"I scarcely know him. But I think he's common and I fancy he's calculating, too, a man full of self-interest."

"And Miss Geean? Don't you like her?"

"I know her very little too. And somehow I don't want to know her any better. I have nothing against her. But—what is her origin?"

"I don't know."

"How did she get her immense fortune?"

"Is it immense?"

"I believe so."

"I have no idea. I suppose her people were rich and left it to her. But I know nothing about it."

"I'm sure she's clever in some way. But—no, I don't

believe I take to her. And I wish she were not running Valentine."

"Well, it can't be helped now. Do you know that Champion came out to Lucerne to see me?"

"No, I didn't know that. Why?"

"Apparently to persuade me to allow Maud Eden to act the principal part in my new play."

"Apparently?"

"At any rate that's what he said."

"And you don't believe it was true?"

"In theatre land it's very difficult to know what's true and what isn't. Sometimes I detest the stage and stage people. But there's a fascination, an extraordinary, inexplicable fascination about both."

"I feel that too."

"There's even a baleful attraction in the unreality of it all, in the unmeaning geniality, in the familiarity that isn't friendship, in the gaiety mixed up with jealousy. Behind the scenes! One misses it!"

He shrugged his too broad shoulders.

"I shall probably go to America and nge into it all again."

But he didn't go. He was held back by a fierce curiosity to see for himself how Valentine's new experiment succeeded. He tried hard to wish success for her. He fought with that energetic combatant, his mind. He wanted to be generous. But when he thought of Trever, and of that awful return to an old love, and of Valentine's tragic acceptance of the return, it was terribly difficult to think, to desire, generously. Dale was morally unhappy during this period. He kept out of London. He did not see Valentine, did not write to her, did not hear from her. As abruptly as she had come into his intimate life she had passed out of it.

As soon as the Box Office of the London Playhouse was open for the sale of tickets for the first night he wrote for a stall. The answer came back that all the stalls were "allotted." Then he wrote for a seat in the dress circle and got one. Two days later, ten days before the first night, a surprising thing happened. He received a letter from Mrs. Champion, inviting him to dine "quietly" in Park Lane at seven o'clock on September the twelfth, the date fixed for the opening of the London Playhouse, and to go with her and

"Percy" (as she always called her husband) to "our box at Miss Morris's theatre" afterwards.

So Caliban had actually been allowed, or had perhaps even been invited, to be present on the tremendous occasion. Dale wondered about that. And, wondering, he accepted Mrs. Champion's invitation, and gave away his dress circle ticket. An uneasy, and even horrible curiosity about Champion prompted him to acceptance. Ever since the episode at Lucerne he had felt a painful interest in Champion. The man seemed blatant, indeed was blatant. But he was subtle, too. And Dale felt deeply concerned about his subtlety.

On the twelfth Dale sent a telegram to Valentine wishing her success. As he wrote it, in a post office, he remembered with a sort of deeply sentimental bitterness—at which the critic in him laughed—Valentine's triumph on his first night at the Central Theatre. What close comrades she and he had been then! And already she had drifted away from him, and to a man who had not thought it suitable to be in love with her because she was acting in Wigan! Or had it been Preston? Leaving the post office he went to a shop in Sloane Street and ordered a big basket of roses to be sent to her at the theatre that night.

"Here's a card, sir," said the smiling pink young woman who had taken his order.

Dale took it and wrote on it, "From Uncle Martin."

"Please send that with the flowers to the stage door in good time."

"Yes, sir."

The young woman looked at the card and stopped smiling. Dale paid and went out of the shop. When he had gone the young woman said to another assistant, a dark girl with a turned up nose.

"Did you ever?"

"Did I ever what?" said the dark girl.

"That was Martin Dale who wrote that play we saw at the Central Theatre."

"You don't say!"

"I do though. He's sending flowers to-night to Valentine Morris."

"Oh, I do love to see *her*."

"So do I. But whatever d'you think? He's her uncle!"

"Never!"

"But he is! Look at this!"

The dark girl looked.

"So he is! Well, think of that now! And him writing a play for his own niece!"

When he got into a taxi-cab that evening to drive to Park Lane, Dale realised that he was intensely nervous, quite as nervous as if he were going to the first night of a play of his own. It seemed to him that for a long time his nerves must have been out of order and that now, suddenly, their disorder manifested itself to him. When the cab reached the Champions' house in Park Lane, he felt as if he couldn't face the long evening in uncongenial company. Why hadn't he stuck to his dress circle seat and gone to the theatre alone? But a morbid curiosity had drawn him towards these people with whom he had nothing in common. He had had an instinct to be with Champion on this first night of Valentine's. And now he couldn't draw back, get away.

In the large and dreadfully ornamental drawing-room, which was full of things called by Mrs. Champion "my bibelots," Dale found his hostess, dressed in cloth of gold and a diamond bandeau, with Champion and Grant. She greeted him with the genteel suavity peculiar to her, a manner which always seemed to Dale to be fresh from the hands of an accomplished manicurist.

"It's a dreadful thing dining so early, isn't it, Mr. Dale?" she said. "But the curtain goes up at eight, and as we've got the Royal Box it wouldn't do to be late, would it? Everyone would notice it. And we being who we are it would cause quite a scandal."

"The Royal Box!" said Dale, trying to get hold of a manner suitable to run in double harness with hers. "That's great! I tried for a stall the first morning the box office opened and couldn't get one. They were all gone. Hullo, Champion! Good evening, Grant. I haven't seen you for a long time."

"No," said Grant. "You seem to have forgotten your way to the theatre these days."

"I've been out of town."

"He don't need us just now," said Champion. "But he'll be all over us again presently. You wait! How are you, boy?"

"Grand!" said Dale, making a resolute effort to seem genial.

"You don't look it."

At this moment dinner was announced by the butler, and

Mrs. Champion led the way in snake-like fashion to the handsome red dining-room.

At dinner, as Dale had expected, the conversation ran perpetually on topics connected with the theatre. First the prospects of the new management at the London Playhouse were discussed. Champion had heard at the Royal Automobile Club and the Savage that young Constantine's play had been deliberately written round the personalities of Val Morris and Trever, and that no one else in the company was given a "look in." Trever had gone to Constantine and had made him an offer for a play with two fat parts, and Constantine had gone into hiding and had written the whole thing in three weeks.

"And then when Constantine read the piece to Val Morris she turned it down," said Champion. "Said it was muck and she wouldn't be seen dead in it."

"Well, but they're producing it to-night!" said Dale.

"Mark Trever gave her an ultimatum!" said Mrs. Champion sweetly.

She looked steadily at Dale, fluttered her painted eyelids, put her dyed head a little on one side, smiled significantly.

"Do you get my meaning, Mr. Dale?"

"I don't know that I do."

"They say who wins the first battle wins the whole campaign, Mr. Dale. Someone must rule in a theatre, you know."

She cast an acid glance at her husband.

"We all know who ruled in the Central during the run of the last piece, don't we?"

"There you go again with that damned rubbish!" exclaimed Champion, with the brutality which he seldom troubled to control. "If a woman says a thing once she's bound to say it a hundred times. And the bigger the lie the oftener she repeats it."

Mrs. Champion stretched her heavily painted lips in an aggravating smile.

"But Mark Trever it seems is a real *man*, Mr. Dale, and has made up his mind who is to be the boss in the new management."

"She don't know what she's talking about," said Champion, obviously stung by his wife's remarks. "She's no more idea——"

"Well, anyhow the play's going to be produced," interrupted Grant, looking about the big room with his characteristic manner of enquiring detachment. "And I'm told it'll take the town."

"Let's hope so!" said Dale, trying to summon geniality.

"Of course we all hope so," said Mrs. Champion, with honeyed emphasis. "For if it's a failure I should think half the dressmakers in London, to say nothing of furniture people, decorators, and the poor things who sell hats, will have to look to the sparrows for their money."

"Oh, leave that stunt about Val Morris's money alone for God's sake!" cried Champion, who was obviously, like Dale, on the edge of his nerves.

"Some people's motto seems to be 'God will provide'!" continued Mrs. Champion, still smiling and taking no notice of her husband. "But I confess, Mr. Dale, that I prefer to have a little cash lying to my name in the bank. Don't you?"

Dale made some, he hoped, light-hearted rejoinder and then abruptly changed the conversation by asking how the rehearsals of the new Indian play at the Central Theatre were going. The two managers gave him a few details, but he noticed that while Grant seemed enthusiastic about the scenic opportunities given him by the piece, Champion spoke of it with an almost complete lack of interest.

"You ought to have let us do your new play, boy," he said.

And again Dale felt that he was deliberately trying to deceive, that he was acting a part to conceal a reality which he didn't wish anyone to suspect.

"I'm sorry," Dale said. "But Miss Eden isn't suited to the principal part."

"Percy thinks that Miss Eden could play any part, provided it's the best in the piece," said Mrs. Champion, with the honeyed acidity peculiar to her. "He considers that her talent has no limits."

"That's all *you* know about it," said Champion. "But I still contend we could have trained her to get away with your heroine's rôle, Dale."

"A cat can be trained to perform on a trapeze, but I prefer to see a skilled acrobat do that kind of thing."

"Jack knows perfectly well Maud Eden would have killed the part," said Grant, bluntly.

"I don't! Not by a long way!"

He turned to Dale.

"Miss Eden gave me hell when I told her what you said about her."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Champion, looking at her bright rose-coloured nails, "that some woman or other is always giving you hell in your own theatre, Percy."

"And much I care! You women always try to make trouble wherever you go. If a man——"

"The automobile is at the door, Madam," said the butler, snapping the conversational spell.

Mrs. Champion got up.

"Why the devil d'you say automobile instead of motor-car?" said Champion roughly to the butler.

"I prefer the word o-tomobile!" said Mrs. Champion suavely.

And she undulated out into the hall, where her maid was waiting for her with an ermine wrap.

The big car held them all. Mrs. Champion and Grant sat in the back seats, Dale and Champion in front. As the car slipped noiselessly through the traffic in the bright evening Dale asked himself why he had consented to go to Valentine's first night in this horrible uncongenial company. The desire to watch, to study Caliban, had not been reason enough for this sacrifice. He knew that unmerciful torture was in store for him during the evening. Now that he was so soon to see Valentine again he realised what a power she still had over him. He was painfully excited when the car stopped before the portico of the London Playhouse.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE audience that night was an unusual one. Valentine's remarkable capacity for saying "no" had kept away most of the "regular first nighters." The critics of course were there. But there were none of the "resting" actors and actresses, and very few of those who had retired from the stage. Sir Eden and Lady

Lisle had a box. Miss Geean was in the box next to them, opposite to the Royal Box, with a Field-Marshal, the handsome dark young man whom Dale had met at the White House, and a lively popular Bishop who had a great opinion of what the stage could do for the good of humanity, and who considered that what it needed was not depreciation but encouragement from the Church. In the stalls were many well-known, intellectual and exclusive people who were scarcely ever seen at a first night. There was quite a brigade of smart young men. And there were several very important Dowagers. The foreign element in London was represented by various diplomatists, America by some exquisitely gowned, nonchalant beauties. A good many pretty girls and young married women of the ultra-smart dancing set were to be seen exchanging greetings and blowing one-finger kisses to each other before the curtain went up. And in a box on the dress circle tier, with a grey-haired elderly woman quietly dressed in black, sat a very small, and obviously very excited boy in a white sailor suit.

Mrs. Champion's febrile eyes fastened upon him immediately.

"Who's that child?" she exclaimed, arranging her shoulder straps, and showing as much as possible of her bare powdered back to the stalls. "It surely can't be—but it *is*! How indecent of her to bring him here to-night, and to stick him up there, to make a show of him actually! Who's he beckoning to if you please?"

"He's recognising me," said Dale, nodding and quickly waving his hand to little Brian.

Mrs. Champion stiffened.

"Miss Morris is really the——"

"I'll thank you to remember that Miss Morris gave me this box for to-night," said Champion. "So you can keep a quiet tongue about her while you're in it. See?"

And then the curtain went up on the first act, showing Valentine sitting alone at a grand piano, in a room lit only by the low slanting beams of a sinking sun seen through some broad french windows which opened upon an elaborate garden.

Dale had not expected to see her on the stage at once. He was startled, painfully startled, and only with difficulty restrained himself from making a sudden movement. It was tremendous—this seeing of her again, after the long interval during which he had thought, and had felt, so much about her.

In that moment he knew for the first time exactly how much she meant to him. And jealousy, a jealousy which seemed to him both of the heart and of the body, burned in him. She was playing. There was applause through which she went on playing. Then Mark Trever came in from the garden through a window space, and her hands faltered. She played some wrong notes, and stopped.

Wrong notes because Mark Trever had come into the room!

When the first act was over Champion got up at once.

"Come out and have a drink, Dale!" he said.

And without speaking to Grant or his wife he went out of the box, and taking Dale by the arm began to walk towards the bar.

"What do you think of it, boy?" he asked.

"It's got—it's clever in a way," said Dale.

"You're right, boy. But what a way!"

"How d'you mean?"

"You know well enough."

Dale said nothing. They were surrounded by men. He saw more than one critic near them.

"What'll you have?"

"Oh, anything! The usual everlasting whisky and soda, I suppose."

Champion looked at him with a sort of sly interest.

"Keep those chairs in that corner. I'll see to the drinks."

Dale sat down and in a short time Champion came back, followed by a waiter with their drinks. On the way he had spoken to three or four people.

"They like it," he said.

"That's good."

"Think so?"

He sat down close to Dale.

"Well, I for one don't wish Miss Morris to have a failure," said Dale.

"Miss Morris—and Trever."

"I wish both of them luck."

"Aren't you a humbug, boy? Aren't you trying after a virtue you haven't got?"

"I think it's mean to wish failure to anyone," said Dale, with sudden heat.

"Where's your art sense?"

"My——"

"Aren't you an artist?"

Dale didn't answer.

"I say you are. If so you've no right to wish spurious muck to have a success. And you know as well as I do that so far as it's gone this piece of Constantine's is spurious muck. There's money in it, I believe, if it keeps up to the standard set in the act we've just seen. Constantine's been brought up in the theatre, and he knows how to get 'em. But I say that Val Morris ought to have cut her throat rather than risk the reputation she made with us by playing in this stuff."

There was a sound of sincerity, of a sincerity almost passionate, in Champion's voice which astonished Dale.

"It's Trever," Champion continued, speaking now in a very low voice. "The dirty dog don't care a damn about her artistic reputation as long as he can get away with the shekels. He's out to make a fortune through her, and she's fool enough to let him do it. If she'd stayed with me I wouldn't have put her into a show like this not if I'd stood to make fifty thousand out of it. A play written in three weeks! I can see what's coming. Constantine's working up for what they call a "strong" second act, and a third act that'll be just a blaze of fireworks. Kylie Betts—you know him?"

"Doesn't he write for the Sunday Messenger?"

"To be sure. Well, he told me just now that the third act—the last one—plays for close on three-quarters of an hour and except for a servant who comes in for a minute, there's nobody on the stage but Val Morris and Trever all that time."

"That doesn't prove anything."

Champion stared hard at Dale.

"You're a humbug, Boy. But I'll say this for you—you're loyal; and even to those who've treated you damned badly."

"I don't see that anyone's——"

"There goes the bell!"

After the second act Dale went to see Brian. He found the little boy in a state of great excitement talking eagerly to the grey-haired woman who was with him, and whom, directly he saw her at close quarters, Dale recognised as the mother of Valentine. The likeness in features was too strong, too

definite, to leave him in any doubt about that, although Mrs. Morris looked far less clever and much simpler than her daughter.

Brian welcomed him enthusiastically, but added, after an almost tumultuous greeting,

"I asked Mummy if you was dead, but she told me you wasn't. I thought you must be dead because you never came to see me any more after I'd called you uncle."

Dale hastily tried to put things right, and then introduced himself to Mrs. Morris, sat down in the box and had a talk with her, in which of course Brian was quite definitely included. He found her a quiet, ordinary sort of woman, with a touch of Irish charm, but entirely lacking in Valentine's curious authority, vigour, and almost extravagant originality. She must once have been very pretty. Now there was a sad look in her eyes, and she conveyed to him the impression of a woman in process of fading away. And, he thought, she must have begun to fade away early in life, long ago. There was no ostentation in her. She seemed proud of her daughter's success, thankful for it, but she did not give Dale the impression that she wished to be identified with it, or indeed with anything. Her devotion to Brian was obvious. She seemed delighted with the play. But Dale realised that she had little artistic sense, and probably no genuine critical faculty. She thought Trever a wonderful actor, and when little Brian said to Dale, "I won't call him Uncle Mark," she gently rebuked the child.

"But Brian has his likes and dislikes," she said to Dale.

"It's Uncle Martin I like," Brian said, energetically.

When Dale left the box he promised Brian that he would very soon go to see him. The child's eyes looked feverish with excitement. For the first time Dale realised that the life in Wilton Crescent, with such a mother as Valentine, must be unwholesome for a boy of Brian's age, probably delicate, and obviously acutely sensitive and excitable.

"Poor little chap!" Dale thought. "Watching his own father act and knowing only that he is watching a man whom he dislikes and has refused to call uncle! There's something to be said for the conventions after all!"

Grant met him in the corridor. Then Champion came up with two newspaper men. There was a general discussion of the play. The newspaper men said it was a "certain go." A well known dentist stopped to speak to them. He had got

in at the last moment through Trever who was a great pal of his. He affirmed that the play was a "sitter." Grant said that if the last act was up to the first two there was any amount of money in the piece. Very little was said about the intrinsic merit of the play. Presently, seeing a small dark man with very bright eyes walking by, Dale detached himself from his group and joined him.

"Good evening, Mr. Tallant. Do you think the play's a success?"

The small man stopped.

"What sort of success?"

"Well, people seem to think it's safe for a run."

"Why not? It glitters, like the nails of a manicured cocotte. Lipstick has been lavishly applied to it. It is cleverly made up. It's in the last new mode. The language is—" he paused—"is up to date. Virtue is not unduly prominent in it. But, best of all, its vices are the vices which are most in fashion at the present moment. Vices, you know, can be as old fashioned as virtues. As a writer beware of such vices. In short this is a modish play. Why should we ask for more than that?"

"And Miss Morris?"

"Miss Morris very wisely has chosen the right mode for her acting. This sort of play requires sensational artificiality to make it go. A Duse would, quite uselessly, have tried to make it human. Miss Morris attempts nothing of that kind. Her endeavour is to be startling and she succeeds in her endeavour. The pit is evidently delighted with her. And so will the stalls be to-morrow?"

"Why to-morrow?"

"Well, to-night it's rather a special audience, isn't it? There are, perhaps, too many people here to-night with brains——"

He paused, pulled his little beard, looked at Dale for a moment, then added.

"And hearts."

The bell sounded.

"Now for the final display of fireworks!" he said.

And he walked away smiling.

"What's he say?" asked Champion, coming up. "What's he going to put in 'The Messenger'?"

"I don't know what he's going to put in 'The Messenger.' But I'm sure he hates it."

"Did he say so?" asked Grant.

"Oh no!"

"Of course he wouldn't," said Champion. "I know him. He never uses a bludgeon. He'll just pierce it to-morrow with a brightly polished needle."

And then they went into the box where they found Mrs. Champion eagerly talking to a Jewish film magnate. She was enthusiastic about the play. In spite of her detestation of Valentine Morris it had completely "carried her away," as she explained.

"And I must acknowledge," she added, with an air of frank Christianity, "I must acknowledge that she acts marvellously."

"That's as much as you know about it," said Champion.

And then the curtain went up.

The last act seemed to be a sensational success. When it was over and Valentine and Trever were being called again and again, Champion, who was standing up, muttered to Dale:

"The damned thing'll run for a year barring accidents."

"I daresay," said Dale.

Champion laid his big hand on his shoulder.

"Now, God's truth, boy! Do you want it to run?"

Dale looked up and met Champion's keen, knowing eyes.

"No, I can't. It's too false."

"And *she's* in it! My God!"

"H'sh!" hissed Mrs. Champion. "Trever's going to speak."

Dale looked, and saw Trever standing alone on the stage in front of the curtain, leaning a little forward, and looking manly and resolute.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in a resonant voice, "I thank you. Miss Morris and I as joint managers here thank you from our hearts for the marvellous reception you have given us on our opening night. Our aim is, and always will be, to bear the banner of art—"

"Oh my God!" said Champion.

"H'sh-sh-sil!" hissed Mrs. Champion.

"—the banner of art bravely forward. We shall try to produce only worthy plays. We shall not be a purely business management. Our artistic aim will be a high one. I think I may venture to say that to-night we have presented a play which represents life as it is, without fear or favour. You

have consecrated our efforts with your generous applause. Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you from my heart both on Miss Morris's behalf and on my own. And now allow me——"

He made a graceful movement towards the wings and came back leading a tiny pale young man with prominent eyes by the hand. Applause loud and prolonged broke out again, and Constantine bowed with offhand self-possession.

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried Mrs. Champion in a thin, reedy voice.

Champion muttered an oath and opened the box door.

"Thank you, Mr. Dale," said Mrs. Champion, as Dale helped her to slide into her ermine wrap. "Bravo! Bravo! You're always so attentive. Well, I *must* say it's been a great evening. I have a lot to forgive Miss Morris for, but she *can* act. Come along! We're all going behind."

She hurried out of the box moving her pointed shoulders.

Champion was waiting outside.

"Come on, Dale!" he said. "Come on, and tell lies!"

"No, I can't."

"But you must. She'll expect you."

"No, I can't."

"Well, we must. She gave us the box."

"Then I'll say good-night and be off."

Grant took him by the arm.

"There'll be a crowd in her room. You needn't say much."

"Sorry, Grant! Sorry! But I can't! Good-night. Champion, say good-bye to your wife for me. She's gone on, hasn't she? And do thank her for her kindness in asking me."

And then Dale took what seemed to be a "header" into the crowd.

On rising to the surface he found himself close to Mrs. Sartoris, who was with a woman and a man whom Dale didn't know. When she saw him she said in a low voice:

"I'm ashamed for her."

"Don't say that!"

"I don't believe in humbug. I shall tell her."

"It isn't her fault. *She's* not a Philistine."

"All the worse! A Philistine would think it all right. *She knows*. Oh, what a hateful evening!"

And then someone spoke to her.

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Dale found a taxi-cab and drove home.

He was in a condition of painful excitement.

In his little house silence reigned. The Macfarlanes and the girl who helped them were doubtless in bed and asleep. Dale locked the front door, and put up the chain. Then he took off his overcoat, went into the library, turned on a light and sat down.

He felt miserable, desperately miserable. What a prostitution he had witnessed that evening! He felt inclined, like some knight errant, to rush to the rescue of the woman he loved. But she didn't want to be rescued. That was the awful truth. And she had triumphed in her sin. For that night she had sinned against herself, against the understanding and the instinct by which she should have been guided, which would have guided her had she let them.

It was a minor tragedy of art, but to Dale at that moment it seemed to be a world tragedy. And he sat there in the silence brooding over it till after midnight had sounded.

At half past twelve his telephone rang in the hall.

He sprang up. He knew at once that Valentine was trying to communicate with him. And when he got to the telephone he heard her voice. It said:

"Is that you, Martin?"

"Yes."

"Please come and see me now, at once."

That was all. After that she rang off. Dale got his coat and hat and went out to seek for a taxi-cab.

CHAPTER XXVII

DALE found a taxi-cab, and in a few minutes was ringing the front door bell at Valentine's house in Wilton Crescent. After a moment of waiting the door was opened not by a servant but by Valentine, in an evening gown.

"Thank you, Martin," she said. "I knew you would come if you were at home."

He stepped in and she shut the door. Then he took her hand. He didn't know it, but his hand was trembling.

"Valentine! It's such a long time!"

"Yes—a long time."

Her hand closed and unclosed on his. She was very pale. Her nut brown eyes looked terribly alive.

"There's nobody here. Come into my room. Leave your coat and hat."

Her hand was still closing and unclosing on his. He waited. She let it go. Then he took off his hat and coat and followed her into the long downstairs room, shutting the door behind him.

"There are your flowers!" she said. "I left all the rest at the theatre."

"Why did you bring away mine?"

"Because you gave me my chance and you care for me. You didn't come to congratulate me to-night. And I know why. You didn't come, you couldn't, just because you care for me."

Dale didn't say anything.

"Come and sit down, Martin."

"Yes."

"Come and sit here."

She sat on a sofa. He sat beside her.

"Have you ever felt ashamed, Martin, ashamed of yourself?"

"Now and then."

"But—really ashamed?"

"I think I have."

"If you only think—then you haven't! Martin, it's a most terrible feeling. It's like having to sleep with someone you loathe."

"Oh, Valentine—dear."

"I'm ashamed of myself to-night. I've done a horrible thing. I've gone down into prostitution, and I'm going to make money, quantities of money, out of it. Martin, I've got lots of debts. All those debts I shall be able to pay, because I've consented to prostitution. I have sold myself for money!"

"I don't believe that. I believe you have done all this because you are governed by a power which, I suppose, you think of as love."

"For Mark Trever!"

" Yes."

" Isn't it love ? "

" I don't know."

" It isn't blind love. It's terribly clear sighted. It sees what is. And yet I am held. I can't get away. How can such a thing be ? "

" Don't be angry. I suppose it's the flesh."

She frowned. For a moment he thought that she was going to say something bitter, but he didn't. She pushed the frown away with her right hand. That was how Dale thought of the gesture she made. Then she said :

" I think I am one of those unfortunate people who can't live reasonably, apportioning their lives. I believe I could be absolutely austere, Martin. I believe I could be a nun. But I can't live reasonably in the world—the world as I know it. I could love God in seclusion, but not in the world. And in the world I have no caution. And I do dreadful things. But what is so terrible is this, Martin : I know they are dreadful. To-night I was crucified because I knew all the time that I was prostituting my art. Mark didn't know that. He honestly thinks Co. stantine's play is splendid. He calls it great. He really believes it is great, much greater than your play was at the Central. I refused to act in it at first. I knew directly I read it that it was horrible gaudy trash, without heart, without truth, without real intelligence. I refused—and then I gave in. That's my terrible fault, Martin—I give in. And I give in always to the wrong people. To-night we were supping with Carrie Geean at the Ritz. But I came away. I simply couldn't bear it. I said I was ill. I looked ill. I felt ill. To act in a play like that makes me feel ill. And I wanted to be with you, all alone with you."

" Why ? "

" Because you understand me."

" I don't really think I do."

" Yes, you and Father Bexland understand me. Some day I believe I shall give it all up. A moment will come when I shall see too clearly like a woman looking through a microscope at Hell. And then I shall give it all up."

She got up, walked to the writing-table and fingered some of the pretty trifles upon it.

" I shan't sleep to-night," she said.

" What does Miss Geean think ? " Dale couldn't help asking.

"Carrie! She's pleased."

"But she said she hated the screech in art."

"And to-night it was nothing but a screech! Yes, I know. And she does hate it with her subtle part. But, Martin, she is backing us."

"Well?"

"Carrie is a business woman. When she goes into a thing she means to make money."

"But isn't she very rich?"

"I suppose she is. But she is a business woman. She hates to be defeated in a money matter."

"So long as she can make money out of you she is satisfied! And so long as Trever can make money out of you he is satisfied. And you'll be able to pay your debts. What more do you want? It seems to me an ideal combination."

Dale suddenly let loose a fury of disgust in those words, in the way he uttered them. He got up, too. He couldn't sit still. His body felt dreadfully restless, full of a leaping restlessness.

"D'you know what I wrote in my diary about you and myself?" he said.

She fixed her painfully alert eyes on him.

"When? What did you write?"

"It was after our great success. I wrote that we might be victims of success. And what are you now? Just that. You're a victim of your own success. People are fastening upon you because of that. And you are allowing them to fasten on you. And you are allowing them to pull you out of your true path. And you are struggling after money. A salary wasn't good enough for you. You must become a manager and share in the profits. You'll pay your debts with the profits no doubt. But you'll run up fresh ones. I'm as certain of that as if I had the bills in my hands now. Well, anyhow I'm not in it, thank God! You said once that to have success by itself, not muddled up with clawing males, would be classic. D'you remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, you can be sure of one thing. I shall never be one of those clawing males after to-night. Trever, Caliban——"

But she stopped him there.

"Why do you speak of Caliban?"

"I don't know, I just happened to think of him."

"You came with him to-night."

" Yes."

" I gave him the box."

" Why did you ? "

" I—I had a feeling that perhaps I ought to make amends to him."

" Really ! " said Dale, in a cold, formal voice.

" Yes. I was a brute to him at the Central Theatre."

" Really ! "

" Anyhow, on an impulse I sent him the box."

" He hated the play."

She looked startled.

" He didn't say so when he came round."

" When he was going to see you he asked me to come along, too, and tell lies."

She flushed.

" So he didn't——" she hesitated. Then she said: " I always knew there was something in Caliban that could *tell*."

" He said to me to-night that you ought to have cut your throat rather than have risked your reputation in such a play as Constantine's."

Her flush deepened.

" Caliban said that."

" But I believe he thinks it'll run for a year."

" And yet he said——"

" He said, too, that if you had stayed with him he wouldn't have put *you* into a play like Constantine's even if he had stood to make fifty thousand pounds out of it."

" And—do you believe that ? "

Dale hesitated, searching himself for the truth. Then he said :

" Yes, I do believe it. You're right about Champion. He's a brute, and yet there is something in him that can understand the real thing and even feel its truth and its beauty, and respect them."

" Why isn't he going to produce your play, Martin ? "

" Because I refused to have Maud Eden in the part I had written for you."

" D'you mean—did he want her to play it ? "

" He came all the way out to Switzerland to *tell* me he wanted her to play in it."

" Then he did want her to *play* in it ? "

Dale was silent.

" He must have—mustn't he ? "

"I don't know. But—I don't believe he did."

They were standing by the writing-table. Now she moved and laid a hand on his arm.

"What is it, Martin? What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking what strange and terrible intentions men and women often have, intentions that lie in them sometimes for years like snakes in their winter quarters."

She stared at him intently. But she didn't ask him to explain. Her hand closed more firmly on his arm. And then she said:

"You must produce your play. You must find someone to play my part."

"I couldn't."

"Yes, you could. Go and look for someone. You had to look for someone before you found me. You will find the right woman."

"No. I should never find her."

"You mustn't waste the play. It's a star play, but—oh, compared with the one we acted to-night it's a masterpiece of sincerity and truth."

"Did you know that Miss Geean tried to bribe Caliban to part with it?"

She looked startled and her hand dropped from his arm.

"No. She never told me."

"Well, she did."

"Of course I wanted it terribly. But I would never have done anything underhand. I would have gone to you. But you ran away from me."

"There was no reason for me to stay in England just then."

"Father Bexland likes you."

"Yes, I know."

There was a long silence between them. In it Dale was conscious of something irreparable. Valentine had taken a false step. She knew it, and so did he. But there was nothing to be done to rectify it. And the reason why there was nothing to be done lay in Valentine, lay in her character, her temperament. If she had been blind Dale felt he could have opened her eyes, and then things could have been changed. Seeing, after blindness, she would have altered in conduct. But she was not blind, never had been blind. Her false steps were taken by one who knew them to be false steps. There lay the hopelessness of the whole matter. Valentine had a clear

intellect, but something within her betrayed it, perpetually betrayed it. Dale loved her, but he did not know how to help her.

"Are you tired, Martin? Do you want to go home?"

"No, Valentine."

"Then stay with me. Light a cigar. Let us sit down and talk. I couldn't sleep. And I can always talk to you. You are so understanding. And there's something so real, so true in you."

"And if I were false perhaps I could entice you to love me!" he thought.

But he only said:

"I've been starving for you for a long time."

He stayed with her till four o'clock in the morning.

It was wonderful to be her friend again. But it was terrible to be only her friend.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN spite of his reconciliation with Valentine, sealed by those hours of talk in the dead of the night, Dale went to America to see his play launched in New York. Not ambition led him across the Atlantic but the very human desire not to suffer too much. He knew that in America he would have little time to himself, that over there his life would be filled to the brim with work, with social intercourse, with innumerable engagements of all sorts. In London there would be too much leisure for the sad man he was just then. Perhaps he would have stayed there had he been able to get to work on a new piece. But the holding up of the play he had written with so much loving enthusiasm for Valentine seemed to have paralysed his power as a playwright. He felt that till it was produced, till he saw it take life and form on the stage, he couldn't settle down to anything else. And in spite of what Valentine had said to him, of her curiously—wasn't it—urgent request to him to produce his play without her in the cast, to undertake another search for a new actress, as he had searched once before and found her, he couldn't bring himself to obey

ner. Why had she been so urgent? There had been a sincerity almost of fear in her voice when she had said: "You must produce your play. You must find someone else to play my part." She hadn't been acting then. She had meant him to take her at her word. But he couldn't do it then, although a subtlety in him, something horribly knowing, had joined a silent voice to hers, had said within him: "Do it! Do it!" And so he had gone to America.

Over there he had a new and great success. The management which had acquired his play had found a brilliant and sincere young actress for the part played in London by Valentine. Dale was a new man. The critics had not had time to get tired of him. They treated him well. Best of all, the public poured into the box office. Money talked volubly. Dale had the odd feeling that money making was the easiest thing in the world. It was apparently his fate to become rich.

People were very kind to him. He found a great deal of sincere goodwill to which his sincerity replied. He made some real friends. And many of the managers were "after him." They wanted another play from him, wanted it as soon as possible. What was he doing? And what about that new play of his which had been bought for England by the Central Theatre management? When was it going to be produced? What was holding it up? Why not give it first in America?

The journalists came round Dale asking him questions. Managers invited him out to lunches and suppers. One night very late at the Lambs Club, over a supper table, the clever manager who was running his present "show" tackled him seriously about the new play. Was it "free" for America?

Dale acknowledged that it was free.

"Then let me have it!" said the manager, an elderly man with a face full of puckers and a mass of yellow-grey hair. "I'll take it on trust. I'll give you a contract without reading it. Would it do for Yvette?"

Yvette Lorillard was the name of the actress who had made a success in Dale's running play.

"It might," said Dale, who couldn't help being sincere, though he felt that sincerity might be dangerous at that moment.

"That's fine! Maud Adams made her fame in Barrie plays. Yvette's going to do the same in yours. This is great. Now

let's hear something about it. I'll find someone else to send on the road with the play we're doing now, and keep Yvette in New York for your next production. There's nothing like looking ahead. Now see here——"

But Dale stopped him. He remembered a lunch at Ciro's with Champion. These managers, on both sides of the Atlantic, were devilish cute, but he wasn't to be "had" a second time. He was going to do what he wanted to do about this unacted play of his. But—what did he want to do?

He had said hastily over the supper table:

"Oh, but I haven't decided yet what I mean to do with my new play!"

And immediately an urge, strangely similar to the urge he had had in London and had resisted, rose in him, and the silent voice said within him: "Let this man have the play! Let Miss Lorillard act in it!"

"You're a funny chap!" said George Wade, the manager.

"Why? In what way?" asked Dale quickly.

"Why? What d'you want to shy off from your chances for? Aren't you satisfied with what I've done for you this time?"

"More than satisfied!"

"Aren't you pleased with Yvette?"

"Yes. I think she's very clever."

"Then what's the matter with my having your new piece and putting her in it?"

"I—I don't want to be rushed."

"Hughie! Hughie!" cried Wade, to a man who was passing their table.

"Well, Georgie, what is it?"

"What is it? Here's a guy who's afraid of being rushed into having a fortune made for him."

"Good evening, Mr. Dale. Well, that's a bright idea! Rush him into bankruptcy, Georgie, and see how he likes that. I wish to hell some guy would give me a kick in the backside and send me where the dollars are."

"He doesn't know his luck," said Wade.

The other man—he was large and brick-red, and had brightly twinkling light eyes of some indefinite colour—walked on with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and Wade said to Dale:

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to set Yvette on

to you. That kid always gets what she wants. And she'll want your next play badly. I'll see to that."

He was as good as his word. A few days later Miss Lorillard tackled Dale in her flat on Riverside Drive, to which she had begged him to come over the telephone. He had known of course what he was letting himself in for when he had heard her clear self-assured voice saying: "Just to have a little talk about the weather, as they do on your side, Mr. Dale!" But he had gone, perhaps with a hope that she and his subtlety between them would get the better of his obstinacy which he obscurely felt to be dangerous.

Miss Lorillard—she had recently secured a divorce from her second husband, Pierre Walters, the famous polo player—received Dale in a luxurious room, which contained, among many other remarkable features, an aviary of various coloured singing birds, who were loudly rejoicing in their captivity. On the stage, besides being an accomplished actress, she had the merit of being sincere in her art. Off the stage she had hitherto always seemed to Dale chiefly remarkable for her audacious aplomb. She had large brilliant violet eyes, and was inclined to stare at those she was with. Her manner was exuberantly genial. She radiated vitality, and seemed to give herself almost ardently just as she was. But Dale didn't believe that he knew her. He felt that she really was genial. And yet he felt, too, paradoxically that her geniality was perhaps a voluminous cloak.

When he came in she gave him both her hands, and her large eyes sparkled, as if with joyful affection. She had a sort of turban of dim rose-coloured stuff bound closely round her head, which made her eyes look even more remarkable, more concentrated and commanding than usual. Her hands were full of will.

"Look at my birds!" she said, in her genial voice. "Aren't they beauties? I've been collecting them for months. Each one different in hue, and each one a singer who'd do credit to the Metropolitan. Otto Kahn is mad about them. They're full of joy."

"Yes? But their joy sounds feverish to me."

"You're a cynic, Mr. Dale. You find us naïve over here. But I think it's fine to be naïve."

She bent her head with the rose-coloured turban and laughed. She had a way of bending her head, and when she

did that she always looked down. Then suddenly she looked up right into your eyes.

"I don't believe you are naïve," he said.

"Yes, I am. I respond to every little thing that comes along. And I can be surprised quite easily. Are you going to surprise me to-day?"

"That depends on what you expect of me."

She sat down on a deep couch near the aviary, and looked up into his eyes.

"Do you admire my talent?" she said.

"Yes; very much."

"Are you satisfied with my performance in your play?"

"I think your performance is remarkable."

"But——?" she said.

"I don't understand. But—what?"

"Georgie Wade has told me. Sit down, do! When you look down on me you dominate me. And I don't want you to dominate me. I want to dominate you."

Dale couldn't help smiling at her monstrous plain speaking.

"There!"

He sat down.

"Now you can dominate me!"

"Perhaps!"

She gazed at him.

"No, I don't believe I can. I think you're in love with someone in England."

Dale wondered whether he reddened at this quite unexpected thrust.

"Make me forget her!" he said, forcing himself to smile.

"If I can, then you'll let your new play go to Georgie, and I shall appear in it."

"Ah, that play!"

He leaned forward.

"Success—you know it."

"Yes," she said, smiling. "And isn't it just lovely and warm?"

"But embarrassing sometimes, too?"

"Well, I'm sure I hope it'll go right on embarrassing me!" she exclaimed. "And if you're a good Christian fellow, you'll help it along. I want——"

But he interrupted her.

"You've never read this new play of mine."

"Give it me right now, and I'll read it before I tuck in to-night."

"I haven't brought it with me."

"You don't tell me you've come out here——"

"But I do!"

The violet eyes, very wide open, were staring at him.

"Anyone'd think you want to keep that darned play in a drawer!" she said.

"Perhaps I do—for a time."

"I know! You've promised it to some woman."

"No."

"The Central Theatre people have got it for England. Of course I know that. They think a lot of it."

"How on earth *d'you* know what they think of it?"

"Well, boy, there's a cable service between here and the old country."

"Have you——"

"I'm not so naïve in business as I am in ordinary life. See here!"

She got up with a swift vital movement, went to a large inlaid writing-table which stood in the middle of the room, opened a drawer, took out a paper, came back.

"There you are!" she said, stretching her arm to him.

Dale took the paper. It was a cablegram addressed to her from London.

I think play a stunner just suit you—Champion.

"You know Champion?"

"I do."

Dale read the cablegram again and gave it back to her.

"You see Champion wants me to have it. Apart from England, of course."

"It seems so."

Dale looked up at her. In his very dark eyes was a question. And the question was "Why?"

Miss Lorillard's bright-coloured birds sang piercingly through the pause. Dale noticed white and red roses in the room. Their scent seemed just then to mingle with the feverish voices of the birds. The turban—he called it that—which Miss Lorillard wore was a dusky red. He had never seen exactly that colour before. Dusky red—roses of Ispahan. *She* had said she could travel the world with this play of his.

Did he want her to travel the world? No. And Champion? Perhaps he didn't want her to travel the world either. Dale saw his play as a rope, a thin rope of steel, holding a woman in London, drawing her gradually back to a theatre she had abandoned.

But Champion didn't want this woman to wander over the world. This cable fitted in with certain other happenings. Yes.

"Even when I'm standing up and you're sitting down I don't seem to dominate you somehow," said Miss Lorillard, plaintively. "Seems to me you're a regular hard shell."

"What a good-natured woman you are!"

"Born so! I can't help it. Well, since my hind legs cut no ice with you I'll sit down again."

She did so, close to him.

"Are you going to stand out against Champion?" she asked, staring at Dale.

She had stated Dale's problem baldly, bleakly, in a sentence. He was startled for a moment, as a man may be startled by the occult knowledge of a clairvoyante.

"What's the matter, you funny man?"

She put a hand on his.

"Now do tell me! You look just like a fellow does when you tell him you know what he did last night."

Dale laughed. And the laugh seemed to release him from something.

"But I didn't do anything last night."

"Well, that's what every fellow says!"

She pressed his hand warmly.

"Going to let me do the play over here?"

An impulse to be truthful came to Dale.

"I don't know."

"Anyhow, you aren't sure you won't?"

"No—not quite sure."

"Going to cable to ask her leave?"

Dale shook his head.

"Too expensive!"

"What a liar you are! Trust an English boy to lie."

"And trust an American girl to spot it every time!"

"So you are going to cable her?"

"If I cable to anyone——"

"Yes?"

"If I cable to anyone it will be to myself."

"Now what do you signify by that, you mystery boy?"

"Haven't you ever cabled to yourself, waited for the answer, and got it?"

She bent her head and looked down.

"I believe I did, before I decided whether I'd marry Pierre."

She looked up in her sudden way.

"But I got the wrong answer. May be you will."

"That's possible," he said.

And in saying that his voice was suddenly very grave.

"Only if your answer-cable says—'don't let her have it.'"

"Perhaps it won't. But—even if it does, I'm awfully grateful to you."

She looked warm and genial.

"I don't know quite why, but I like you," she said. "I don't seem to dominate you, but I like you just the same."

"And I like you. But I do know why."

"Let's hear it."

"You're really very human, I think. And I don't believe you pose. I don't feel I know very much about you. But I don't believe you pose."

"What's the good of posing, anyhow? It makes me tired. Now what'll you have?"

* * * * *

So Champion had stretched out a big hand to America!

After that talk in Riverside Drive Dale understood completely why the manager had always made such a very strong impression upon him. Under the brutality there was subtlety; under the coarseness there was will-power; under the crude determination to make money, and plenty of it, there was a strange comprehension of artistry; under the lust of the typically sensual man there was, perhaps, something else, something that partaking of lust was yet more than lust, persistent, dangerous, but not ordinary.

Champion was working in the dark. Dale was now quite positive of that; and he thought of his own work, the new, unacted play, as he had never thought of a piece of work before. Champion had never meant Maud Eden to act in it. The visit to Switzerland had been intended as a blind. It had no doubt taken Miss Eden in. It had been meant to deceive Dale, too. But his instinct had been a right instinct.

Champion meant to lure Valentine back to his management with that play written for her. But he didn't mean her to travel the world with it without him. He had, with his keen, practised manager's eye, seen what a splendid "vehicle" for the exploitation of Valentine's talent he had got hold of in Dale's play. It was a weapon in his hand. He meant to use it some day. He was waiting. But meanwhile he was endeavouring to get rid of the possibility of the play eventually going into Valentine's hands for the other side of the water. His cablegram to Miss Lorillard proved that to Dale.

Dale was sure that if he refused to let George Wade have the play for Miss Lorillard, Champion would presently try to buy from him his rights for the whole world.

Dusky red—roses of Ispahan! He saw Valentine travelling the world with his play, as Bernhardt travelled the world with "La Tosca," another star-play; he saw her in the Far East touring with her own company, seeing strange peoples, the wonderful flowers that bloom in lands far distant from England. Miss Lorillard's turban had suggested so much to him! And the feverish voices of her bright-coloured birds were in his ears when he sent that cable, of which he had spoken, to himself, and waited for the answer.

Was he going to stand out against Champion in this matter of America? He had told Miss Lorillard that he wasn't quite sure that he wouldn't let her have the play. And that had been true. But now he must decide.

For Wade was persistent, and Miss Lorillard was a "kid who always gets what she wants." And Champion was no doubt trying to help things on from London, though he sent no communication to Dale. (But he was too clever to do that, Dale said to himself.) Dale wanted to come to an instant decision. But he had to wait for an answer to that cable of his. The man who had received it evidently couldn't make up his mind in a hurry what answer to send. Nevertheless the answer came at last.

Cable to Champion suggesting that Miss Lorillard play the part not in New York but in London.

It was an unexpected, even a startling answer. But Dale did not hesitate. A smile full of irony made his lips curl as he rang a bell in the "suite" he was living in at the St. Regis

Hotel. Directly he had rung the bell he wrote out the following cablegram to Champion at the Central Theatre :

Urge you to engage Yvette Lorillard to play lead in my new play in London when she finishes over here—Martin Dale.

That night he went to see Miss Lorillard at the theatre. When she saw him she said at once :

" Now sit down right here and tell me ! "

" Tell you what ? "

" Have you sent that cablegram you spoke of ? "

" Yes. "

" You have ! That's fine ! And has the answer come ? "

" Yes. "

" You don't say ! "

She stared hard into his eyes.

" Don't try to hypnotise me ! " he said.

" What is it ? "

But he replied by another question :

" Tell me ! Are you hopelessly tied up with Wade ? "

" With Georgie ? Why do you ask me that ? "

" Are you ? "

" Well, he's got me for two years certain. This play'll go for another ten months or a year. And then there's your other play to follow. "

She bent her head, smiling, looked up suddenly.

" I bet that'll see the second year out in New York. "

" I don't intend to produce it over here till it's been done in London. Have you ever thought of appearing in London ? "

Miss Lorillard was startled out of her persistent aplomb by this question. Emerging from it she looked like a charmingly startled girl. Dale felt a warm hand on his right wrist.

" You want me for your play in *London* ! " she breathed.

" Well, if you could play it here, why couldn't you play it in London ? " said Dale.

He had—and he knew it now—started on this oddly winding path with the overmastering intention of making a shrewd riposte at Champion. Champion had played a keen game with him, and quite certainly thought him a clever fool. He had deliberately, in Switzerland, let Champion think him that, go away thinking him that. He had now seen a chance for a blithe revenge, and had taken it—relying on a foreseen reply to

his attack by Champion. But now, when Miss Lorillard spoke with such startled, almost breathless eagerness, he thought, "I'll go through with it. I'll push the attack home. I'll sacrifice my dearest ambitious desire for Valentine's sake." In that moment he felt as if he had a sudden moment of illumination, saw hidden motives exposed in nakedness, read characters by the light of a glare—Champion's character, and Valentine's.

"Why shouldn't you?" he repeated.

"You're a dear man, and I was wrong. You aren't in love with someone in England."

"And really I'm doing all this because I am!" Dale said to himself. "That's how much women know about us."

Miss Lorillard kissed him warmly when he left her. But, as Dale knew, kisses behind the scenes in the theatre generally mean very little.

While Dale waited for Champion's reply to his cable he amused himself by speculation as to what line Champion would take, what that reply would be. If Champion accepted Miss Lorillard, and Georgie Wade could be "squared"—Miss Lorillard had undertaken to carry through that "squaring"—then Dale's own action would have destroyed the fabric of his dearest ambitious dream. He would have sacrificed his play on the altar of—what? A moral idea? A secret ugly fear? A creeping jealousy, the mere existence of which was an insult to Valentine, a degradation to himself? But surely Champion wouldn't accept her.

He didn't. His answering cable was characteristic.

Where is your head she is utterly impossible for London but don't tell her so keep this private—Champion.

Dale smiled cynically, looked grave, considered marriage felt suddenly stiff with obstinacy, cabled again.

Have read your cable to Miss Lorillard saving play it and just suit her I agree and must urge your engaging action for London production—Dale.

A fight across the ocean, wasn't it? Thrust for thrust. New York against London.

"What a traitor Valentine might think me!"

That grey thought came to Dale. But Valentine had urged

him to look for an actress to play the part written for her. He was only doing her bidding. And perhaps his secret reason for action was dreadfully akin to her secret reason for prompting him to action, his fear for her marching with her fear for herself.

Yet could that be possible? It was strange that a lover should think so evilly of the one whom he loved. But Dale's warmth of heart couldn't overcome the penetration of his brain, or, perhaps—he wasn't absolutely certain about this—the undesired sureness of his instinct.

Meanwhile Miss Lorillard had been in conference with "Old Georgie Wade," as she called her celebrated manager, who had made more stars, and more people see stars, than any other man in America. At first Georgie Wade was angry and obstinate. He talked of "going behind" him, of "taking him for the biggest guy in creation," of damned ingratitude and the perfidy of women, in his vernacular "the darned cussedness that ought to keep any feller who's weaned from ever putting a red cent on a mare." But gradually, under a kneading process deftly applied to his "make-up" by the Lorillard, he began to soften, and to jump to the possible monetary advantage which might accrue to him if she came back to his management with a big success in London to her credit. And she promised that if he let her go to the Central Theatre for the run of Dale's new play, she would return to his management in New York directly the run was over, bringing the play with her, of course.

"That's more like talking," he said at length, letting a few puckers escape out of his clean-shaven, india-rubber-like face. "I'll cable to Champion right away and see what he says."

"No, don't butt in yet, Georgie. Dale will arrange all that."

While Miss Lorillard was expressing herself thus optimistic-ally Dale had just received the following cable from Champion:

Cant think what has got in your brain my cable to her was eyewash London would not stand her for nuts God sake come Home before you go stark American—Champion.

When Dale had read it he resolved that he would go home at once. In New York all this was like shadow boxing. He had a sudden longing to get to close quarters with his man.

And, after a brief, but vital, interview with Miss Lorillard and Georgie Wade in which he put before them the necessity of an immediate consultation between him and the management of the Central Theatre, he sailed for England on the *Mauretania*.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was the second week in December when Dale set his feet once more on a London platform, and drove to his little house in Tedworth Square, where he was greeted warmly by the Macfarlanes.

"The papers are full of the success of your play, sir, in America," said Macfarlane. "Even the *People* has had a notice about it."

"That's very nice of the *People*. Yes, Macfarlane, it's been all right for me in America."

"But I hope you're glad to be home, sir."

"Of course I am."

He looked round his room with the stone-coloured walls. Was he glad? Yes; he was. But somehow the house scarcely looked like a home to him. And the thought pierced him: "Can a man who lives alone ever have a home?"

"Mr. Champion called here yesterday, sir."

"Mr. Champion! What did he want?"

"Wanted to know when you were coming, sir. I told him we expected you to-day, and he left the message would you ring him up immediately you arrived."

"Oh. Here are my keys."

Macfarlane took them and went away to unpack, and Dale went out into the tiny hall and looked at the telephone. But he didn't ring Champion up. He wanted, he told himself, a little breathing space.

He dined alone, then took a taxi and drove to the London Playhouse. His intention was to buy a stall and see the performance. But on arriving at the theatre he saw a large board outside. The house was full. Nevertheless he went into the vestibule and up to the box-office.

"Is it impossible to get in to-night?"

"Sorry, sir. Quite impossible."

"There isn't a box?"

"No, sir, nothing. Everything's gone."

"The management here's in luck."

"Yes, sir," said the box-office man, who evidently didn't recognise Dale. "But look what a combination! Miss Morris and Mr. Trever in a play by Mr. Constantine. We're turning money away all the time."

"Miss Geean must be pleased!" thought Dale.

"D'you know how the Central Theatre's doing?" he asked, carelessly.

"Fairly well, sir," said the man, looking slightly contemptuous. "Just fair, I'm told. Miss Maud Eden is a favourite, of course. But I hear the play isn't likely to run much beyond Christmas."

"Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

So Valentine's "prostitution" had had its reward! What a lot of money is made by prostitution of various kinds, prostitution of body, of brain, in this world of untrue values, of shifting standards, of fools presuming to judge and to appraise. Cynicism got the upper hand in Dale just then. And feeling, or believing he felt, the cuirass of cynicism buckled tightly about him, he walked through the night to the Central Theatre.

There were no boards leaning against its painted pillars. But he didn't ask for a seat. Instead he went round to the stage-door and enquired for Champion.

Brewster greeted him with the warmth that is reserved for the successful. Yes, Mr. Champion was upstairs, and would, Brewster knew, be delighted to see Mr. Dale.

"We've heard of your success over there, Mr. Dale. We was all pleased about it, I can tell you."

"Thanks very much, Brewster. And how are you doing here?"

"Fairly, Mr. Dale, fairly, but nothing like what we did with your play, sir."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Miss Morris shouldn't have left us, sir."

"Well, you know, she had to think of her future. Sentiment and business don't——"

He stopped short, remembering that sentiment and business were harnessed together in the London Playhouse.

"Well, but we *made* her, sir, didn't we?"

"D'you think so, Brewster?"

"But didn't we, sir, really? Who was she till we took her up?"

"Valentine Morris. That's who, and what, she was. And how d'you know, Brewster, that she didn't make us?"

"Well—I'll be damned!" said Mr. Brewster, when Dale had gone behind, turning to Harry. "Hear that?"

"Rather!" said Harry, biting his nails. "But Mr. Dale's keen on Miss Morris. You know, Mr. Brewster, as a man is keen on a spicy bit o' stuff! He——"

"Shut your saucy mug! What do you know about spicy bits o' stuff?"

"Oh, well—I haven't knocked about among chorus ladies since I was fifteen for nothing, Mr. Brewster!"

And Harry walked away whistling "Lizzie for two!" in a careless manner.

"Hulloh, Meyer!" said Dale, near the managers' room.

"Mr. Dale! Glad to see you back! You *have* hit 'em hard in the States. Congratulations, I'm sure."

"Thanks. I suppose Mr.—Mr. Grant's here, eh?"

"No, I'm sorry. He isn't. He's laid up with a touch of the 'flu. But Mr. Champion's here, and I know he'll be very glad to see you. Do come this way, please."

"How's the new piece going?"

"Oh, splendidly—splendidly!"

"I'm glad of that."

"It'll run till over Christmas."

"Not into the spring?"

"Well, you know there's generally a big drop about Christmas."

He gently opened a door.

"Here's Mr. Dale, Mr. Champion."

Champion turned his large head slowly. He was sitting before the writing-table in Grant's round-backed chair, studying the "return" for the night's performance which had just been brought to him, and he didn't get up.

"Hulloh, Dale! So you're back! They told me you were expected to-day."

He held out his hand.

"Glad to see you. My congratulations! You're going to make a fortune on the other side from all I can hear."

"Thanks. Yes, I'm in luck."

"Luck be damned! You've given them the stuff. I always said so. Two whiskies, Meyer."

"Certainly, Mr. Champion."

When Meyer had gone out, and Dale had sat down in a big leather arm-chair, Champion said:

"Grant's laid up with the 'flu. He'll be sorry to miss you."

"I'm sorry, too. Is it bad?"

"He's afraid of bronchitis. We shan't see him here for a week at least."

"How's the new play going?"

Dale saw Champion's morose eyes go to the return slip which lay before him on the table.

"Fine!" he said, heavily.

He looked away.

"Have a cigar?"

"I'll have one of my own cigarettes, thank you."

"Right! Oh, here are the drinks!"

When they were alone again Champion leaned forward with his big arms laid on the table. He looked, Dale thought, tired, unusually dissipated, and worried. There was a faint yellow tinge in his large clean-shaven cheeks. His shrewd, quickly-moving eyes were sunken in the midst of the pouches and wrinkles that hemmed them in. As he sat with his arms on the table, pursing his big lips, there was something monumental in his appearance. He looked unhealthy, loose, sinister, yet subtly woebegone, too, as if he were wretched beneath the grim shell of his enormous self-possession. But he looked like a man whom it would be extremely difficult to overcome.

There was a silence in which he drank some whisky and soda. Then he said:

"Glad you've paid your first visit to us, Dale."

With his sometimes almost ludicrous sincerity Dale replied:

"But I didn't. I went to the London Playhouse first."

Champion lowered his tufted eyebrows.

"The Playhouse!"

"Yes. But I couldn't get in."

"Full?"

"Jammed."

"It would be. What did I tell you on the first night?"

"I hope you're doing satisfactory business."

Again Champion's eyes went to the return slip.

"We're covering expenses. That's about all. The play goes jammed well with the audiences. But it doesn't pull in enough to the box-office."

"Oh, I'm——" began Dale.

But before he could go on Champion interrupted.

"Did you see Val Morris at the Playhouse?"

"No."

"Didn't want to, eh? Well, I'm not surprised. Now you've gone American I suppose you've no use for her."

"Gone American? Why, what do you mean?" asked Dale calmly.

"Mean! What about your cables to me?"

He moved his big arms, pulled open a drawer.

"I've got 'em here."

He put a hand into the drawer and took out some slips of paper.

"Urge you to engage Yvette Lorillard to play lead in my new play in London when she finishes over here—Martin Dale."

His voice as he read sounded, to Dale, full of heavy, and bitter, sarcasm.

"Have read your cable," he continued after a pause, still in the sarcastic voice, "'to Miss Lorillard saying play would just suit her I agree and urge your engaging her for London production.—Dale.'"

He sat still and stared at Dale across the big table.

"Well?" said Dale, in an unemotional voice.

"Well, after that does Mr. Dale say he hasn't gone American?"

Champion leaned back in his chair, still staring at Dale.

"'Pon my word, boy, you surprise me," he said.

"And what about your cable to Miss Lorillard?"

"Eyewash!"

"What do you mean by that exactly?"

"She's a nice girl. Fine eyes. Got a certain amount of talent. If she wants your new play for America, what business is it of mine? Why should I try to turn her down?"

"Why should you try to help her to get my play?"

"You can do what you like over there."

"Exactly. But you tried to help Miss Lorillard to get my play for America. And what about your cables to George Wade?"

Now Dale didn't know that Champion had ever cabled to George Wade about his play. He asked that question out of his instinct. But he knew at once from Champion's suddenly anxious expression that his instinct hadn't played him false.

"Who says I ever cabled to Wade?"

Dale laughed.

"Don't let us bother about it. You want Wade and Miss Lorillard to get my play for America. I want Miss Lorillard to appear in it first over here. I'll see about America later on."

Champion took another sip at his whisky and felt for his cigar-case.

"You're wrong, boy," he said. "I don't care a damn about Wade."

He paused, opened his cigar-case, looked into it. Still looking into it, he then added:

"Come to that, I should be quite ready to buy the world rights of the play from you myself."

In spite of himself Dale made a slight movement.

"So that's how much you know about my cables to old Georgie Wade!" added Champion.

He lit a cigar.

"And that's how much I believe in your play!"

"Of course I'm glad you believe in it."

"It's a certainty—with the right woman in the principal part."

"I think Miss Lorillard could play it very well."

"She wouldn't do over here."

"That's where we differ. I think she would."

"Did you tell her so?" asked Champion, with sudden sharpness.

"Yes, I did, and I told Wade the same thing. They know I've come back to see about it."

"So—" said Champion, "you've fallen for Yvette Lorillard, have you?"

There was, Dale thought, an expression of profound surprise, tinged with contempt, in his voice.

"There you're wrong," Dale said, without the least hint of anger. "If by 'fallen' for you mean fallen in love with. I simply think that Miss Lorillard is a very good actress, and would do very well in my new play over here. In my opinion, she's worth fifty of Maud Eden."

"Miss Eden's nothing to do with it."

"Well, you tried to make me agree to put her into the part. You came all the way to Switzerland only for that. You told me so yourself."

"You refused, and that's done with."

"Exactly. That's done with. But I don't want my play to be hung up indefinitely over here. I want to see it done."

"So do I."

"Then I wish you'd engage Miss Lorillard, and put it on directly the run she's in finishes in New York."

"And when'll that be?"

"They think it will last for another ten months or so."

"You must be making a fortune out there."

"Wade has Miss Lorillard for two years. But he's willing to let her come over here, if she goes back to him when the run of my new play in London is over, and brings the play with her."

"Oh, indeed! And so the idea is that she is to have it both here and in the States! And then you sit here and tell me you haven't fallen for her!"

Dale smiled. He had never felt more completely in control of himself than he did at that moment. And he had never before had the feeling that he had the power to play Champion as a practised fisherman plays a big salmon. In Champion he realised that there was a smouldering of fire. He wished to see that smouldering of fire burst into a blaze. If it did he would know, and he wanted to know. For though he told himself that now he was positive of a certain thing, nevertheless he had the very human desire for further information from headquarters.

"I really haven't," he said. "I like Miss Lorillard, but that's all. I'm interested in her rather as an artist than as a desirable woman."

"Well, I'll take it from you, Dale. But I know what Miss Morris thought when I told her about your cables."

This time Dale's sudden movement was very perceptible, and his sensation of playing Champion left him abruptly.

"You have told Miss Morris!" he said.

"Yes. I happened to meet her in the street. Only yesterday it was. And I told her. I know she's always taken a friendly interest in you and your work. You didn't put private in your cables."

"I didn't think it necessary."

"I'm sorry if I've made a mistake!"

"There is no mistake! Why shouldn't you tell her? Only I always think it's as well to keep these things quiet till everything's arranged."

"Well, as she was so in it with you, and had heard the play, I thought you wouldn't mind."

"I don't mind. As Miss Morris refused to stay in the Central and act the part I wrote specially for her, I am free to look out for another actress. And by the way she begged me to look about and find someone almost the last time I saw her."

"The devil she did! Well, I only wish you'd seen her face when I told her about your cables."

Dale was silent. He wanted to ask a question; but he knew that now Champion was trying to "play" him. There had been an abrupt reversal of rôles. At that moment Champion's cleverness was very apparent to Dale.

"She wasn't pleased, boy. I can tell you that," Champion added at length.

"Haven't you realised by this time that if a man tries to please one woman he is almost certain to irritate another?" said Dale, drily. "I've got to think of my play."

His voice became sterner.

"Miss Morris is in partnership with Trever now, and no doubt they're both making money hand over fist. Why should I sit still, do nothing, and let my play get mouldy lying in a pigeon-hole? I'm not going to do it. Miss Morris might have appeared in my play, but——"

"She might yet!" interjected Champion roughly.

"I don't see how. I'm not going to let Trever have it."

"Not going to! You can't. The play belongs to me."

"I know. You needn't rub that in. Remember I've got a time limit down in my contract."

"Three years!"

"I ought to have made it two," said Dale.

"I say," said Champion, with irony. "You know what's one of the biggest manufactures over the water, don't you?"

"Manufactures! No, I don't."

"Swelled heads!"

"Look here, Champion, that sort of sarcasm won't affect me. I'm really not going to let my professional affairs be at the mercy of women. I've made up my mind about that. If, as

you suggested just now, Miss Morris is put out because I've done what she told me to do, and found an actress fit to play the part she refused to play, that isn't my fault. When I wrote the part I thought of her. She refused it. Now I've got to think of myself. Will you make an arrangement to bring Miss Lorillard over here when she's free, and put my play on with her in it ? "

" No ; I'm damned if I will ! "

Dale put his cigarette slowly into an ash tray.

" I can't force you to it," he said, calmly.

" No. You flatly refused Miss Eden. I refuse Miss Lorillard."

Dale fixed his dark eyes on the big man who was staring at him across the big writing table.

" Very well," he said, still in the same calm, equable voice.

" Then Miss Lorillard is ruled out. I now have another suggestion to make."

" What's that ? "

" I want my play to be produced first here, where I made my first real success. Apparently the piece you've got now won't go much beyond Christmas."

" No, I don't think it will."

" Then I withdraw my objection to Miss Eden's appearing in my play. I suggest that you offer her the part, and make the play your next production."

Champion opened his large, loose mouth, evidently with the intention of making an instant rejoinder to this proposition. But he shut it without saying anything. The look of stone, which Dale knew well, seemed to stiffen his face, making it suddenly older than before. He gazed down at the writing table for an instant. His eyes seemed to be on the return-slip which lay there, but Dale didn't believe that he saw it. During that moment Dale wondered, with intensity, what he would say when he made up his mind to speak. What he did say was this :

" That's very generous of you, Dale."

" Generous ! Why ? "

" To own yourself mistaken after all you've said against Miss Eden."

" Oh—well ! "

(" What a horribly shrewd brain ! " Dale found time to say to himself.)

" If one can't have the very best, I suppose it's wise to be philosophic and to take the second best," he said.

"Perhaps so—if you get the chance to take it."

"The chance?"

"Well, boy, the difficulty in the case we're discussing is this. Miss Eden, like all leading actresses, is damned sensitive. And unfortunately I've told her all you said about her. I was obliged to—to save my own bacon with her. She was my leading lady here. I had to stand well with her or there'd have been hell in the theatre. Besides, she knew I wanted her for the part. So of course I couldn't pretend the veto didn't come from you. You see that?"

"Yes—of course."

"Well, I'm sorry. But after what you said about her I couldn't put the proposition to Miss Eden now. To speak fair, boy, it wouldn't be decent. Would it?"

Dale knew that he reddened. At that moment he couldn't help hating Champion. All through this interview he had been haunted by the knowledge—which had seemed like pure feeling—that he was playing a part completely outside of his nature. Insincerity, in his case, was, must be, a masquerade. And now to be rebuked for indelicacy by Champion! He revolted, as if from an insult. A terrible desire rose in him to cry out all the truth. He felt like one being rolled in mud. But he didn't know how to stop, how to escape from the masquerade, how to become forcibly his true self. And he heard himself say:

"I hardly see that."

"Well, look here——"

But Dale simply couldn't stand any more amplified lesson in gentlemanly conduct from Champion, and he interrupted brusquely,

"All this is purely a matter of business——!"

("What a lie! What a lie!" cried the interior voice.)

"—and I see no good in mixing up sentiment with it."

"I'm not talking sentiment, Dale. I'm talking common decency. Seems to me America——"

Dale got—he felt as it he sprang—up.

"Well, if you refuse every suggestion I make, it's no earthly use talking about the matter," he said, trying to keep his voice calm and steady. "I wanted Miss Lorillard for the part. You refuse to have her. Then I go back to your own suggestion and say I'll accept Miss Eden. You turn down that now on the ground that Miss Eden is so sensitive that it's no longer possible to offer her the part. Very well! There's

no more to be said. Let's drop the whole thing. Keep the damned play in a pigeon-hole till my contract with you expires. In less than three years' time, thank God, I shall have my own work in my own possession again. Till then I'd better try to forget that I was ever fool enough to write it. Good-night, Champion."

"But see here, Dale——"

The big man got up and stretched out an arm.

"Dale! Don't go like this!"

"Good-night! Good-night!"

"Boy, Boy, what's the use of getting rattled? What good'll——"

But Dale was gone.

Champion stood for a moment by the open door. Then he turned round, smiling, went slowly back to the writing-table and pressed the electric bell with his forefinger.

"I must have another drink on that!"

CHAPTER XXX

ALTHOUGH he had been in London for more than a week Dale had not seen Valentine. The interview he had had with Champion on the day of his arrival in England had sickened him. His own insincerity had disgusted him almost as much as the sly cleverness which the manager had shown in dealing with it. But even now he wasn't sure whether Champion had seen through his insincerity. Certainly he had not seen through it in the beginning. Dale was convinced of that. But perhaps, in the end, he had gone too far. His suggestion about Maud Eden? And his final outburst of anger? He hadn't meant to lose control. Till that last ugly moment he had felt that he had the mastery of himself. And then, like a boy, he had given in to his disgust, his anger, his feeling of shame.

How unfitted really a man of his temperament was for work in connection with the theatre! He had a fierce inclination to give the whole thing up, in spite of his great success.

But how strange that success was ! To feel himself temperamentally unsuited to the theatre, and yet to possess a talent for it which at this very moment was bringing him in a small fortune ! If only he could get rid of his sensitiveness, his persistent and native love of sincerity, of those delicacies of feeling which such men as Champion laughed at and trampled over !

And he had actually felt that he could " play " Champion, even at one moment that he was " playing " Champion. He hadn't taken the measure of his quivering sensibility or of Champion's granitic indifference in connection with men.

But now, away from the theatre, he felt that he took it. And he had an almost violent inclination to give up the theatre altogether. He had plenty of money now. And money was pouring into his bank from America. He wasn't obliged to work. He might idle, at any rate for a time ; might amuse himself, fill up his days, as rich men without obligatory work amused themselves, filled up theirs. Till now he hadn't travelled much. The world was there for him to see. He might go away, might wander. London was dark. The weather was vile. A week and he could be on the Nile in a land of eternal summer. Or he might go much further, to South America, to China, Japan, the Pacific Islands.

Should he do it ? Why not ?

He was profoundly disgusted with life and himself. He said to himself that he loathed the theatre, its coarseness, its insincerities, its jealousies, its false geniality, its under-current of intrigue and sexuality. The reaction from enthusiasm was strong in him, was even devastating. Far off indeed seemed the days when he had found Valentine in the midst of failure, had realised the strength of her talent, had battled for her, had won through for, and with, her, had seen her success ; far off even those later days when he had written his second play for her, that play into which he had put more love than sheer artistry, and which now had become the cause to him of so much misery. " The damned play "—he had called it to Champion. And when he had called it that he had genuinely hated it, like an enemy. He had loved, while he was writing it, and now he had come into hatred.

It lay in a pigeon-hole. Surely he had better get away. He had the frostbound feeling that he would never be able to settle down to work till the fate of that play was finally decided.

And how could he idle through a London winter? His house in Tedworth Square was abhorrent to him.

And, worst of all, he felt like a traitor to Valentine. That was grotesque. And he knew it to be grotesque. Nevertheless, he couldn't rid himself of the feeling. And he was painfully, and almost perpetually, pre-occupied about Valentine's mental attitude to him. Champion had given him a shrewd shock when he had told him of that street interview with her.

But she had said: "Look for another actress!"

Women said so many things that they didn't mean. And always the most important things that they said were the things they meant least.

Dale went to see Mrs. Sartoris. She was, he thought, a real friend to him, and he rested on her bluntness as on a rock warmed by the sun.

As he expected, she was able to give him news about Valentine. But that news was unpleasant, was even painful to him.

Mrs. Sartoris was emphatically "a highbrow." Dale told himself that, told himself that she was too intellectual, too "particular," inclined to expect and demand too much of those in whom she recognised unusual talent. Nevertheless, because of her sincerity, and her undoubted good taste and indifference, to, even active dislike of, vulgar popularity, what she said always made some impression on him. She seldom talked at random. And he knew that she seldom felt at random.

Her report of Valentine was bad.

"I don't very often see her now," she said. "She hasn't time to bother about me. And probably she scents my disapproval. (She's terribly quick in gathering impressions, and her impressions are accurate.) Where does Valentine come from?"

The steady turquoise blue eyes fixed themselves on Dale.

"I don't know. I've met her mother. She's—well, she's a very simple sort of woman. Not the least vulgar, but—I should call her homely. She must have been good-looking. I liked her. She's entirely unpretentious."

"I know! She isn't like a boarding-house keeper, and she isn't like the sort of woman one meets at Arlington House."

"And, thank God, she isn't like the type of woman whom

English and American papers published in Paris call 'socially prominent.' "

"You're right! They are the worst! Now perhaps I'm going to be a snob. Are you ready?"

"Quite ready!"

"Hold on to your chair. I think that Valentine has the breeding of great talent, but I don't think she has the breeding of what used to be called in pre-war days gentle birth. There's a great difference between them."

"Yes."

"You remember her house warming?"

"Of course."

"That was an instinctive effort after the best. But there was a false note in it."

"How extraordinary your saying that!"

"Why extraordinary?"

"Do forgive me; I can't tell you. I oughtn't to have said that."

"Never mind. The false note was that man, Mark Trever. Now Valentine's life, from all I can hear, is nearly all false note. She has—at least, I think so—declined artistically and also socially. Of course the people *not asked* laughed at her for her so-called 'exclusiveness.' I saw that in another light. I saw it as a genuine desire for betterment and attempt after betterment—like an ignorant person's, with right instinct, choosing of the best books in a library and rejection of rubbish."

"That's what it was."

"Her going into management with Mr. Trever was a terrible mistake, I think. He is gifted no doubt. But he is essentially common. He is only intent on money making. And he just simply doesn't know good from bad in art. Valentine always does. She is never wrong. Trever, if he were to read, say, Hauptmann's "Hannele" would be sure to think it less fine than the last clever piece of theatricalism, say Constantine's horrible play, which is crowding the London Playhouse at this moment. Just because it crowds the house he thinks it's fine work."

"Yes—he would!" said Dale, remembering Trever's opinion of Valentine when she was acting in Wigan. (Or was it Preston?)

"And she's in his hands, I believe."

"In his hands?" Dale said, trying to conceal his painful interest.

"You and I needn't talk scandal. Let us say that he's the ruling spirit in their management and—perhaps in some other directions, too. He came to her party. Now, I believe, she goes to his. You realise the difference?"

"Oh yes."

"Her acting in your play was exquisitely sincere. In Constantine's play it's tawdry."

"I know."

"And *we* all realise that."

Dale couldn't help secretly smiling at that "*we*." But he knew exactly what it meant when applied to Valentine's reputation as an actress.

"Instead of taking another step up she's descended. She knows it of course. She always *knows*. And she dances, dances, riots, spends, spends torrents of money. Miss Geean is generally with her!"

"D'you dislike Miss Geean?"

"I scarcely know her. But I don't think I could ever like her very much."

The conversation stopped there for almost a minute. Then Mrs. Sartoris said,

"There's one new departure I haven't mentioned."

"What is it?"

"I hear Valentine is very often seen at the Oratory and always alone."

"She's a Catholic."

"Martin," Mrs. Sartoris said with an unwonted touch of feeling. "I sometimes wish I had never brought you to Valentine."

"Don't wish that."

"Then don't prove to me that my wish is a reasonable one. Evidently there's weakness in wonderful Valentine. (For she is wonderful.) Don't let me find weakness in you. Work! Work as if you had never known her—or as if, having known her, you'd found in her another Duse, a woman who however passionate in her life couldn't go wrong in her art. Valentine has gone wrong in her art. Don't you go wrong in yours."

"But I am doing nothing," he said.

CHAPTER XXXI

THREE days later, and while Dale was still brooding over that conversation with Mrs. Sartoris, and was still undecided about the immediate future of his life, he received by an afternoon post about five o'clock the following note, written in a large handwriting that looked aggressively bold :

R.A.C.
Pall Mall,
Dec. 17.19—

Private

DEAR MR. DALE,

I hear you are back after your big success in New York on which I congratulate you from my heart. I should very much like to see you if you care to fix a date, as I want to place a proposition before you which I think might result in something to our mutual advantage. Could you lunch with me, say at Ciro's? If so would the 19th suit you at one o'clock? Or if you prefer a later hour I suggest supper at the same place on the same date about a quarter to twelve. Our show here is going fine. But a prudent manager looks well ahead. I hope you are well. I still think with pleasure of your splendid play at the Central in which I had the honour of appearing.

Yours in all sincerity,

MARK TREVER.

Could you drop me a line to the London Playhouse?

Dale had thought about Trever; how he had thought about him! He knew him but little, except through Valentine's report of him. Being sharply observant, however, and watchful of people, he felt as if he knew Trever as it were in the rough. Here was an opportunity of coming to closer quarters with him. Dale decided to take it, and he answered Trever's note with an acceptance of the supper suggestion. His man would surely be more truly Mark Trever at midnight than at one o'clock in the day.

That night of the 19th, before going to Ciro's, Dale, in evening dress concealed by a thick overcoat, went to the pit

of the Central Theatre and saw a good deal of the play running there. Afterwards he looked in at the Garrick, and then took a taxi to Ciro's getting there a few minutes before midnight.

He found Mark Trever in the hall slipping out of a sable lined overcoat.

"Hulloh, Dale! This is fine!" he exclaimed heartily in his manly voice. "Glad to see you! Congratulations on your wonderful success in the States."

Escaping deftly from a sleeve he held out his hand and gripped Dale's right hand firmly.

"I've got a table in the balcony. We shall be quieter there."

A jazz band was playing in the restaurant. People were dancing. Pretty painted girls and young men—elderly men, too—were coming in. Scents criss-crossed in the warm air. Powdered shoulders and backs showed white against black evening clothes. Rose red nails gleamed against bobbed heads, over which the hair undulated giving out glints of copper colour, as white hands arranged the already arranged, patted and stroked to show themselves. Several smiling women spoke to Trever. "Hulloh, old chap!" said a Jew. "I hear your show'll run for a year!" A tall stock-broker murmured, "Put some of your profits into Rio Tintos, old chap!"

"Let's get out of this, Dale!" said Trever, smiling.

"Dale" again! But the actor was actor-manager now. The dropping of the mister marked the step upward.

He led the way to the balcony. A large genial Italian convoyed them to a table at the far end.

"You eat oysters?"

"Thanks—yes."

"Or would you rather have caviar? No? Then oysters!"

He ordered carefully and elaborately. Of course champagne. (And he knew the best year.)

"It's good to see you again, Dale. You've hit them hard over there!"

He bowed over the balcony to someone below.

"Cosy little place, isn't it?"

"Very!"

"Success seems to have got hold of us both, doesn't it?"

Dale congratulated him on the triumph at the London Playhouse. But he didn't—he couldn't—call it a triumph.

"Very good of you to say that! Success—in management of course—depends on one thing. One must know how to choose. And I think I do. This hot lobster's not bad."

"Awfully good!"

"They've got a new *chef* here."

"I didn't know that."

"But you've been away. Tell me all about it. If you'll allow me to say so I'm very much interested in your career, Dale. I always believed in you. I believed in you from the very first."

"Very good of you to say so."

"Tell me all about it. This chicken's cooked in cream—with mushrooms and truffles. I hope you'll like it. Hector!"

"Sir?"

"Give Mr. Dale some more champagne. I always knew you'd make good, Dale. You've got the real stuff in you. You've got the modern note, as young Constantine has. There's a brilliant boy! But your note and his are different. There's a little more heart to you, and, if I may say so, a little less sparkle. Your wine has body. You know what I mean? The difference between Château Claret and the best champagne! I think that's a fair comparison."

He talked with amazing fluency. He was looking exceedingly handsome, and marvellously "well set up," in clothes that fitted as perfectly as the evening clothes of a *jeune premier* on the stage of a West End theatre. In his fine blue eyes shone the assurance of success. He looked satisfied—self-satisfied.

"I wouldn't have Pêches Melba! They're so hackneyed now, aren't they? This is a combination of Luigi's. The strawberry jam goes well with the ice, doesn't it?"

"Awfully well!"

"Variety is the spice of existence. One mustn't repeat too much."

He paused for an instant as a man does who hopes he has made a *mot*.

"A manager mustn't forget that. For the stage, Dale, should be the mirror of life. I'm sure you agree?"

"Of course!"

"We should see life as it were reflected, as in a mirror, on

the stage. That's what I'm aiming at in the London Playhouse. And now, Dale"—his voice took on an even more manly and forthright colour—"and now, Dale, I want you to help me to carry out my aim. Constantine and you I look upon as men of the moment. I've got him and now—why should a real man trouble to beat about the bush?—now I want you."

He looked firmly into Dale's dark eyes, smiling.

"I want a play from you."

"I'm afraid I haven't got anything that——"

"Oh, don't mistake me! I'm not after that play Champion's got. I don't want to try to get it away from him. Fact is, Dale—I'll be quite frank with you—that's not the sort of play I want at all. I've heard about it. It's a star play, a woman's play. That's not what I'm after. I'm looking for something with of course a good part for a woman, but also with a good, a first-rate part for a man."

His handsome face suddenly changed and for a moment looked hard.

"I've no intention of being swamped in my own theatre."

He laughed.

"Have a cigar! Men, after all, still play the predominant part in life. Now if my theory holds good, if the stage should mirror life, then men should also play the predominant part in the theatre. Q.E.D. as we used to say at school. That's a good tango they're beginning, isn't it?"

He turned a little in his chair by the rail and looked down on the moving maze below. For an instant Dale watched him, seeing him as a specimen, a specimen from the phenomena of life. Then Dale, too, looked down. For the specimen had slightly stiffened. Its glance had become a stare. Its attention was obviously fixed. Upon what?

Valentine was down below on the polished floor, moving in the tango with a tall young man of the South American type, very dark, graceful but not effeminate, with heavy-lidded eyes, brown hands, a Spanish self-possession.

Valentine! But her hair was cut short and had changed its colour. The nut brown was invaded by a coppery red. Her body was as unclothed as was possible in a London dance club. In what she wore there were tints of a gorgeous autumn, at the moment when nature flares through the forests, defying her effort in summer. And her white face,

half asleep, as it seemed, in a passionate discontent, yet had a look of intentness. As she moved she was slightly frowning.

Dale watched her from his height, with a dreadful fixity, in which his whole body seemed locked together with his mind. And for the first time he saw her as a Bacchante. For a moment she was tired in the dance, tired like Thamar when she sank down on her pile of cushions after the traveller's body had disappeared in the blue cascade. But that woman would emerge from that voluptuous fatigue. And when she did!

Dale glanced again at his companion.

What a hard face it was! For an instant Dale looked at one of the passions—jealousy; a player's jealousy of another player.

"I've no intention of being swamped in my own theatre." The voice which had said that belonged to the face which was watching that woman in the tango.

The situation in the London Playhouse was quite clear to Dale now. He hadn't come to *Ciro's* that night in vain.

"There's Miss Morris!" he said.

"Yes. She's a beautiful dancer. And there's Carrie Geean."

"Where?"

"Over there on that sofa against the wall, sitting with Lionel Hert."

And then Dale saw Miss Geean, dressed in cardinal red, wearing marvellous rubies, totally unchanged, calm, non-committal, watching the tango behind a supper table, with a bending, elderly Jew, whose beard and whose eyelids and whose hands seemed to droop, as if the weight of his money bowed them down.

"I see. Does Miss Geean dance?"

"Yes, splendidly. She's a damn clever woman."

There was a new sound of respect in his voice.

"She knows how to live. She makes no mistakes."

Dale's dark eyes must have looked keenly enquiring, for Trever changed his manner, and even his look, with abruptness.

"But don't let's bother about the women. We can go down presently and have a chat with them. I want a play from you, Dale."

"I'm not working just now."

"Resting on your laurels, eh? But that won't last."

"I don't know. I'm thinking of going abroad for a bit, of travelling."

"I wish I could. But you'll work wherever you are. Now do you mind if I tell you my ideas? I want to prove myself a progressive manager, not a mere opportunist. Will it bore you if I tell you what's in my mind?"

Without waiting for the formality of an answer he drank some more champagne, glanced at his large cigar, and began to "spread himself." In the course of this "spreading" process Dale was favoured with a summing up of life as seen from what Trever would probably have called the actor's or actor-manager's "angle." It was obvious that now that he was the guiding spirit—he called himself that two or three times in the course of the conversation—the guiding spirit in a West End theatre Trever conceived that he had the right, and possessed the intelligence, to direct dramatists in the way that they should go. Fate having placed him in the proud position of being able to buy plays it was natural that he should feel himself to be superior to dramatists. They merely created. He paid. It was all the difference between acting in Wigan and acting in the West End of London. Dale realised that Trever now considered himself much the superior of any dramatist in creation. He spoke, negligently, of dramatists "waiting on my mat"; he spoke of "my position as a West End manager." And he "told" Dale.

He told him what the "movement of the time" was, what was the "true mission of the modern stage," how life had "changed since the war" and how the playwright's art "must change with it," exactly why the actor-manager with "a sense of his responsibilities" was such an "important factor in modern life," and why it was his "mission" to "encourage and foster the right type of playwright," and his "duty" to trample ruthlessly on the "mere sensation-monger." He explained to Dale at length why "the highbrows" were "out of touch with the robust common sense of the people," and in what way it was possible to "bring intellect into the theatre without antagonising the man in the street, who after all has as much right to get what he wants as either you or I." He told Dale what life was now, and what a mistake it was of dramatists to write "pre-war stuff," when human nature was

moving away from "all the old shibboleths" towards "a vaster horizon."

And finally he told Dale that what he wanted was a play with a fine fat part for himself.

And all through his discourse Valentine was dancing below and Dale, listening attentively to his host, was watching her dance, and was seeing her as a sad and degraded, yet determined Bacchante, one who had fallen into prostitution and who was dancing in an effort to escape from self-knowledge.

"There is music. There is movement. There are lights and the noises of humanity laughing and being gay. The night is speeding to music. A man's arms are round me. I am dancing—beautifully. I am a success. Therefore all is well with me and I am happy."

And then Dale looked away for a moment and saw her all alone at the Oratory. Why did she go there? As a child she had been brought up in the Faith, and now its hand was upon her. For if it was not upon her why, in the intervals of acting and dancing, and spending "torrents of money," should she go alone to the Oratory? And he thought of the "consolations of religion." Many people, many women especially, remembered a half-forgotten, perhaps scarcely any longer believed in, faith only when sorrow drew very near to them. And Dale saw Valentine as a sorrowful Bacchante, creeping when the night of dancing was spent to the foot of the altar.

"That's the sort of play I want from you, Dale, and the sort of part I'm looking out for. You won't mind my telling you. I'm one of those who think that the actor-manager and the dramatist should work hand in hand. I want to encourage talent, to set it going in the right direction. And I shall always be ready to back my opinion with money. I am keeping my eye on you and young Constantine, Dale. You seem to me the most promising among the younger men, and I feel you'll develop. Constantine will get more body into his work, and you—if you'll forgive me for my plain speaking—will get more sparkle into yours. Let's have some old brandy."

Champion—Trever! And Valentine dancing below! Dale understood that night as never before the inner meaning of her desire to be rid of "clawing males." The human touch! How repulsive it could be and often was! He felt gooseflesh rising all over his soul.

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Ten minutes or so later, with an exuberant gesture, Trever uttered a phrase well known in theatreland.

"Well, what about it?"

Dale replied to this with another question.

"Is Miss Morris going to remain at the London Playhouse?"

"Val Morris! Of course she is."

"Oh. Then any plays you acquire must contain parts for her!"

"Of course! Naturally!"

"I only wanted to know. From what you've just been saying I couldn't be quite sure about that."

"I assumed you knew it. But—" he glanced over the railing for an instant—"but things have changed a little since we started," he continued confidentially. "I have reason to know—this is entirely between ourselves, Dale—that I am the real draw in the theatre. The letters I get, the information that reaches me from various sources, the general attitude of the public towards the management, leave no room for doubt on that head. That being so—I don't want Val Morris to know this, of course—it's obvious that in any future plays we produce care must be taken to give me prominence. I don't want women's plays. They wouldn't go down at the London Playhouse."

"But didn't you want to get hold of my new play?"

Trever stared.

"I! Never! Oh—I know! You've heard about Carrie Geean. But that was a move engineered by Miss Morris."

"Oh, was it?"

Trever smiled.

"You know—we both know what women are. They can't run quite straight even the best of them. I wouldn't have *that* play of yours as a gift. What I want from you is—you're not going!"

"It's getting very late."

"But—"

"I must go down really. Thank you for an awfully good supper."

"Not at all! Well, if you really *must* go! But now, when shall we meet again and plan out—"

"I'm afraid I can't write you a play."

"Can't! But I've told you I'm ready to put down—"

"I can't work like that."

"Like what?"

"I can't work to order."

"But young Constantine——"

"Young Constantine, I suppose, is what they call '*un homme du théâtre*.' I'm certainly not. I couldn't possibly cut my cloth—or shall we say my flame-coloured plush?—to your measure, Trever. You must try someone else. I shall never write a play for you. I'm certain of that. Thank you again for a jolly good supper. You must come and dine with me one night at the Garrick. But we won't talk business. It would be no use. I know what I can do and what I can't."

"Well, I must say, Dale—I'll come and dine with you—I must say——"

"Don't, my dear chap! Just put me down as a damned fool who can't—just can't—do certain things though they might prove very profitable to him. I'm made in a certain way and can't change my make. What a crowd! I don't know whether Miss Morris has seen me, but I think I ought just to go in and give her a greeting."

And he walked resolutely into the restaurant. At that moment he felt that he must go to Valentine—as a protector. The conversation he had just had with Trever had revealed her to him as a creature adrift, surrounded by people indifferent, or even hostile, to her as a human being, but acutely alive to her capacity as a money-making asset. He had been especially and most disagreeably, struck by Trever's remark about Miss Geean, and by the expression of his face when he had made it. If Trever so ardently admired Miss Geean she must certainly be something less than admirable. Where were Valentine's real friends? Trever probably hated her. For when jealousy burns in the breast of an actor hatred is never far off. Carrie Geean, Dale began to feel almost sure, simply looked upon her as an exceptional money-making proposition. Mrs. Sartoris and her set, those who mattered, the "*we*" at whom Dale had secretly smiled, but of whose importance in the London world he was now painfully aware, were disappointed in Valentine, and would no doubt let her go to her fate, if it were evil socially and artistically, without lifting a finger to hold her back.

Dale felt that Valentine needed a protector, one who genuinely cared for her, one who, although a lover and unable to help being that, was capable of very sincere friendship. As he pushed his way through the Bohemian crowd he had,

perhaps absurdly, the eager, chivalrous feeling of one going to a rescue. He saw Valentine's naked back and short copper-coloured hair not very far from him, but as he was getting near to her there was a clash of either cymbals or fire-irons—Dale wasn't sure which—and she moved away from him in a fox-trot. He stood for a moment looking after her. Then he felt a soft, even furtive, push against his shoulder, evidently a deliberate push given by a hand. He turned round and saw the elderly Jew who had been sitting with Miss Geean.

"Excuse me," said a slightly lisping voice. "I believe you are Mr. Dale?"

"Yes."

"My name is Hertz, Lionel Hertz. Miss Geean asked me to invite you to drink a glass of champagne. We are sitting here."

And, turning, he slightly drooped in the direction of the wall by which Miss Geean was still sitting behind the supper table.

"Please come!" added the Jew.

And Dale had to follow him.

"Welcome back!" said the soft, rather colourless voice, and the soft, useless-looking hand nestled in Dale's hand. "Do sit here."

"But I'm taking your place!" Dale said, to Mr. Hertz.

The Jew smiled, with a sort of intensely cold cynicism.

"Not at all. I am going to dance. Miss Geean will not dance with me. She is quite right. But it amuses her to see me inflicting suffering on others. How should we get through life if it were not for the suffering of others?"

He shot an oblique look at Miss Geean from his half-closed eyes, touched his small pointed beard, and walked surreptitiously away. A moment later Dale saw him dancing slowly with a very pretty, very young, laughing girl.

"He's got a horrid tongue but a heart of gold," said Miss Geean.

"What! Even his heart is made of gold?"

"Precious metal never comes amiss. How successful you are! I know all about America. On the road over there you are going to make a fortune."

The grey eyes were upon him. In their steady gaze Dale thought he detected a new respect, which disgusted him.

Those eyes, which seemed to be fixed on him, were surely looking beyond him at his money. At that moment Dale felt that suddenly he had penetrated to the inner chamber of this woman. And the chamber was a safe full of "valuables."

She offered him champagne. He took a very little and they talked. She knew really a great deal about his doings in America. Quite evidently she had been following him up from a distance. He congratulated her on the success of the scheme she was backing.

"Yes," she said. "It's the biggest success in London. I made no mistake when I backed those two."

"Someone said to me to-night that you never make mistakes."

"Who was that?"

"Mark Trever. I've been supping with him."

"Oh."

She didn't say that she had seen them up on the balcony. But Dale knew that she had.

"Mr. Trever is dancing," she added.

Dale saw Trever going by, looking down strongly into the dark eyes which a handsome actress, famous in comedy, lifted to his. Trever held himself well, danced admirably, though with just a touch of slightly showy exaggeration.

"Yes. And I see Miss Morris is here."

"She came with me. Dear Valentine! She dances every night."

"Rather tiring I should think after a performance."

"The play she's in now doesn't take very much out of her."

"No? I think she looks tired."

"She is never tired. She is made of steel."

"You are, I believe!" thought Dale.

"I must speak to her," he said. "This is the first time I've seen her since I came back."

"I think she's very disappointed in you."

Dale felt one of those dreadful movements of the blood which so often disconcerted him when Valentine was spoken of in connection with himself.

"Why?" he said.

"I don't know. She hasn't told me. I just feel that she is."

" Really ! I don't know why she should be disappointed in me. Shall we dance ? "

" Very well. "

She got up.

Dale had never danced with Miss Geean before. Although he could dance as well as the average man he did not dance very often on account of the shortness and broadness of his figure. Although he was not an awkward man he knew that with his physique he could never look really graceful. Now he danced merely because he wished to get away from the barrier of the supper table by the wall, and, if possible, to make an opportunity of speaking to Valentine. So he put an arm behind Miss Geean, took her right hand lightly with his, just touching it, and went out on the polished floor. And suddenly he knew something else about her, and he said to himself.

" She is old. "

As Trever said she danced splendidly. Her figure was slight. She was light, even feathery light. But now that for the first time Dale held her body it gave him, mysteriously, that message.

" I am old ! " it said to him.

When the music stopped they were quite close to Valentine and her partner, the man Dale had seen from the balcony.

CHAPTER XXXII

" **V**ALENTINE ! " said Miss Geean, making her soft voice slightly more penetrating than usual.

The copper-coloured head turned.

" What is it, Carrie ? Hulloh, Mr. Dale ! I saw you up on the balcony eating an endless supper with my co-manager. "

Perhaps a look from her sent her partner away. Anyhow, he murmured something in her ear, and, turning, began to speak to Miss Fox of the Winter Garden Theatre called, perhaps because of her apparently sleepless vitality, " the fox that never goes to earth. "

"How wonderfully well you're looking!" Valentine continued, gazing with hard, restless eyes at Dale. "Success is the great vitaliser. I hear America took you to its bosom. When did you come back? Yesterday? To-day?"

"A good many days ago. But I don't think I shall stay here long. I'm thinking of going to the Nile, or perhaps even farther."

He spoke abruptly. He was driven to say what he said by her look, her manner, the tone of her voice.

"You will tell me I wouldn't stay in this darkness another twenty-four hours," she said.

And then, instantly, she said it terribly soft and even tender, hearing, perhaps, and in her characteristic voice. The protective feeling came back to him, the longing—wasn't it: the turning? Wasn't it, perhaps, an intention?—to go to her rescue, to rescue her from her success, and from those wrapped in it with her. For Valentine's voice could be tremendously expressive, and when she said "in this darkness" it spread darkness about her, it created, for an instant, a great darkness. And Dale knew that she was conscious of a life, hers, pulsing in darkness.

"But London is full of light," said Miss Geean, with a touch of sarcasm, and a slight gesture towards the crowded, brilliantly lit up room.

"Yes, artificial light! What's the good of that?" said Valentine.

She spoke almost savagely.

"I wonder," she added, "why we congregate in the dark places, in great cities spreading their ugliness through darkness. We are mad. That's what it is!"

A bang came from the band. It was followed by a rattle, and a confused noise that sounded like crockery being shaken about and dashed together. Valentine moved her naked shoulders. The movement was not a shudder, but, to Dale, it suggested a shudder.

"I'm going to sit down," she said.

And she turned away abruptly and walked towards the sofa on which Miss Geean and Dale had been sitting a few minutes before.

"She seems in a bad mood to-night," said Miss Geean. "But she's a creature of moods."

Lionel Hertz spoke to her.

"Go and sit with her!" Miss Geean said in a low voice to Dale.

Dale moved away, then stood still and looked towards Valentine. She was just sitting down. Now that for a moment she was alone there was a desperate look on her face. He noticed that her angularity, which had a great deal of curious charm, had slightly increased; or perhaps it was made more manifest than usual by her audaciously slight dress. She put an arm on the table, drank some champagne listlessly, saw someone she knew and smiled. And the smile was sharp, provocative, and full of assurance. It died away as she noticed Dale coming towards her.

"May I sit with you?" he asked, tentatively.

"Yes, of course. Tell me about America!"

She did not look at him. Her eyes roved round the room. Already she had been infected with the inattentive restlessness that makes so many London women unattractive. Or was she merely simulating it? Dale wasn't quite sure. She might be trying to punish him.

"Oh, I had what's called a very good time there," he began.

"So I heard. Maud Eden looks pretty to-night."

"Where is she?"

"Over there! In an electric blue dress. There! Dancing with my co-manager."

Dale found them, and saw Trevor gazing down into Miss Eden's large eyes, as she danced with her head thrown back, and her white throat abandoned as if waiting for his lips.

"I saw her act to-night."

"Did you? Was it good?"

"Yes, in a London sort of way. Of course there was nothing universal about it."

Suddenly, with the uttering of the word "universal", Dale riveted Valentine's attention, or touched the secret springs of the woman beyond the "moods". She turned her dyed head and looked at him. And he saw again not the discontented Bacchante, striving after riot in the midst of something that was surely like despair, but the Valentine who had once broken down Champion's defences by the truth of great drama rooted in nature.

"Universal! What made you say that? Oh, what made you say that *here*?"

"But why not here?"

"How dare you ask me that? *You!*"

Again he felt they were kindred. She was disappointed in him, angry with a woman's unreason—with him. But he and she were kindred. And they knew it.

"The Universal!" she added, as he didn't speak. "The very word gives one wings. But how can one fly when one has money-bags attached to one's feet?"

"If they keep you down——"

"What else can they ever do to people like us?"

"I don't want to be poor," said Dale, with his dreadful sincerity.

"Nobody does. But don't you sell your birthright as I have sold mine."

Suddenly her face changed, became almost ugly.

"But I expect you have sold it already—in America."

"No, I haven't."

"But you are going to."

"I don't think so."

There was sternness in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Don't *you* grab after money ever. Some people can do it and be happy in doing it. And some people—I don't know how—find their fulfilment apparently in getting richer and richer."

(He saw her eyes for an instant fixed on Miss Geean, who was actually dancing with Lionel Hertz.)

"But *you* would be horribly miserable if you degraded your talent for money. If you do your best and money comes let it come. But never go for it. Never spread your worst as a lure before the damnable golden calf."

Her voice quivered with fierceness as she ended.

"Carrie! Carrie!" she said, suddenly getting up.

"Yes? What is it, Valentine?"

"I'm going."

But at this moment Mark Trever came up.

"Come along, Val! You haven't danced with me to-night."

A moment later Dale saw her sad eyes looking at him, as the flaming colours of autumn were submerged among the many tinted fabrics that clung to the thin moving figures of women.

He waited for a moment. Then a sense of intolerable oppression took him by the throat, and he went away—alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTER that night at Ciro's Dale waited in London, expecting at first, hoping still even when expectation began to fade, that Valentine would telephone to him asking him to come to her. But no message came from her. A true knight—he thought more than once—wouldn't have waited for a summons from the woman he loved in distress, but, with lance in rest, would have gone at once to her rescue. Being a sensitive man with a hatred for anything that savoured of "push," being moreover in love with a woman who certainly didn't love him, Dale felt that he couldn't do that. Valentine mightn't want him. Probably she didn't want him. And yet they were akin. And he knew that she had some feeling for him. He even knew that with her better part she cared for him, perhaps clung to him. But, quite evidently, he didn't attract her physically. That was the ugly fact which he had to face, which now he did face squarely. There was nothing repulsive in him. He knew that nothing physical in him repelled her. But, on the other hand, nothing physical in him drew her to him. She was fond of his mind. She liked, could even lean on, his nature. Much in his temperament was suited to much in hers. She had probably been able to put trust in his heart. But his body didn't call to her. His hand couldn't give her a thrill when it touched hers. His eyes, when they looked into hers, couldn't convey to her the message which wakes physical longing in a woman. He didn't know—summed up it all came to that—how to disturb her. And he told himself that if a man can't disturb a woman he has no real power over her.

Her immediate yielding to Trever's casual eleventh-hour request on that evening at Ciro's had given him a shock. Trever's manner, if not his words, had been almost insolent. It had suggested to Dale the conviction in Trever, "You are mine to take or leave." And yet Valentine, who had just said to Miss Geean that she was going, had immediately revoked her decision, given up her intention, and begun dancing with Trever. If she had not done that Dale would have gone away with her, would have taken her home. She had known, perhaps had meant that when she had said she

was going. But a casual sentence from Trever had changed everything.

Dale felt humiliated.

In his humiliation he again thought of leaving England, of going on some long journey. He even made plans to go, looked at maps, read guide books, visited the Piccadilly Office of Messrs Thomas, Cook and Son and asked for information about steamships to China, to South America, about sailings on the various lines to Egypt

But he didn't buy tickets to anywhere. And presently he was ashamed to show his face in Cook's office.

Meanwhile—and this didn't improve the state of his spirits—he had been in correspondence with both "Georgie" Wade and Miss Lorillard in America. Miss Lorillard beneath her geniality possessed an unusual fund of determination. American women as a class are thoroughly accustomed to getting what they want. And Miss Lorillard wanted London. It became speedily obvious to Dale that the celebrated and powerful Wade, perhaps the best known manager in New York, was an untiring dancer to Miss Lorillard's tune, and that the tune of the moment, persistent as one of those Eastern melodies, which an Arab piper will go on playing with unfailing breath till the Western listener feels that he has at long last realised eternity, was "I want to act in London."

She bombarded Dale with cablegrams and voluminous letters. She held him to his promise with an obstinacy which became almost vicious. He had made no promise, and of course she knew it, nevertheless she held him to it. And presently she directed from Riverside Drive a heavy barrage on Champion, and was joined in it by Wade.

One day Dale was called to the telephone, and on going to it found that Champion was at the other end of the line evidently in a very bad temper.

"A nice thing you've let me in for, Dale. Here's Lorillard swearing you practically engaged her for the Central. What's that? . . . What d'you say? . . . Well, at any rate you gave her the impression. . . . Eh? . . . That's all very well but Wade says the same thing as she does. . . . No, of course you hadn't any authority. . . . Well, they both seem to think the matter was practically settled. . . . No reason to? . . . I can't hear you. . . . Oh—well, that puts it all on me . . . and after my cable to Lorillard I'm in a damned awkward

hole. . . . You should have waited till you'd seen me . . . I say you should have waited and spoken to me first . . . my cable to her was all eyewash and if you weren't an innocent you'd have seen through it. . . . I say you'd have seen *through* it. . . . Lie, d'you say? . . . a lie? Well, we all have to tell lies in the theatre. You know that as well as I do. You weren't born yesterday. . . . I say you *were*n't born yesterday. . . . I'm in a damned awkward fix because I want to keep in with old Wade . . . he might be useful to me . . . he's got a lot of plays and I might want one—You've upset my appiecart with him—Eh?—What's that? . . . I shall have to say you've changed your mind. . . . You haven't? . . . I can't help that. I shall have to say—look here, Dale, I don't want any bluster from you—you'd better come. . . . I have to think of my theatre. . . . Oh, that's all no good. You'd better come round—Come round and let's see how we can get out of it . . . have you been to Miss Morris? . . . Well, I'm not surprised . . . she won't forgive you easily for those cables to me about Lorillard . . . for God's sake come round."

Dale's cheeks were burning when he came away from the telephone. The cursed theatre! Why had he ever begun to write plays? Yet a big cheque from New York had just been paid in to his agent. And he remembered his words to Valentine. "I don't want to be poor." The theatre fed him. The theatre fascinated him. He possessed the faculty of filling the theatre to which he gave his work. And yet wasn't he beginning to loathe the theatre?

The telephone sounded again.

"Dale—is that you. . . . Are you coming round? . . . I must see you. . . . Very well, I'll expect you. . . . I'll be here. . . . We've got to get out of this the best way we can."

Dale went to the Central that day with the intention of speaking very plainly to Champion. His native sincerity had a desperate longing to have its fling, to show itself brutally in its true colours, to have done with all the subterfuges and slynesses which, like rats in a sewer, make their home in a big theatre.

"I'll say exactly what I think. I'll speak out what I mean."

He found the great building humming like a hive. A new production was "on the stocks." Stage hands were running

and calling in hoarse voices which sounded full of dust. Carpenters were hammering. Scene painters were discussing, and painting out, and building up. Supers were being drilled and sworn at. Lighting schemes were being tried, condemned, tried again. Two agitated authors were wishing they were dead. "Principals" were standing about and complaining of their parts. Maud Eden, who was still the lead in the theatre, was explaining to Grant in the front row of the shrouded stalls what she wasn't going to wear and wouldn't wear for a thousand pounds a night. Reddle, the great dressmaker, was telling Mrs. Munham, the wardrobe mistress, that Miss Eden *would* wear mauve though it made her look as if she'd just been dug up after "being dead a damned sight longer than Lazarus."

In short a new play was being got ready to put on as soon as possible, the Indian play having proved "a washout."

Meyer couldn't find Champion in the manager's room but knew he was expecting Dale. After a great deal of searching he was discovered in the dress circle of the theatre having a secluded row with a male dancer who had been engaged to appear in a cabaret scene. When Dale and Meyer appeared, the dancer, a fair-haired youth with a very marked waist and long-fingered, white hands, was saying:

"I couldn't do it, Mr. Champion, not even if you were to double my salary."

To which Champion replied:

"There's no question of doubling your salary, Mr. de Groote. Now go away and sleep on it. Maybe you'll feel different in the morning."

"Damn these dancers!" he added to Dale, when Mr. de Groote had glided away, after showing his very fine teeth in a smile which suggested a strong desire to bite his employer. "They're as bad as a leading actress. I sometimes wish to God I'd never seen a theatre."

"And so do I!" said Dale.

He must, without being aware of the fact, have said it with startling intensity, for Champion stood for a moment staring at him in a silence evidently caused by amazement.

"Well—you said it first, Champion."

"Yes, but—there's ways and ways of saying the same thing."

"Anyhow I mean it. The fact is scarcely anyone in a theatre runs really straight."

"Go along with you! We're no worse than they are in any other profession. Look at lawyers, doctors, brokers!"

"I don't want to look at them. I've quite enough to look at in the theatre."

"No, no, no! That won't do, Wiltford! That makes 'em look like a lot of corpses!" suddenly roared Champion.

"Wipe out that green! Wipe it out altogether! Let's sit down here, Dale, at the back. You've got me into a nice hole, I can tell you. After my cable to Miss Lorillard what the hell am I to say about not wanting her for London?"

"What have you said?"

"How d'you know I've said anything? Well I've—I've said—provisionally—that owing to our arrangements here we can't produce your play under any circumstances for over two years."

"And does she believe that?"

"No, damn her, she doesn't! That girl's as cute as a performing cat. And she's got old Georgie Wade at her elbow. And if there's any managerial trick old Georgie isn't up to I've never heard of it. The old devil cabled me only this morning, 'That don't go down with this guy—Wade.' Now what are we going to do?"

"Tell her the truth—if it is the truth. Tell her you think she's too bad an actress even for London."

"Now, Dale——"

"Tell her you won't have her in your theatre at any price. Tell the truth for once in your life, Champion."

"What the devil's the matter with you?"

"The matter? Nausea, Champion! Nausea of lies! The fact is the theatre infects you with insincerity. 'What are we to say? How shall we get out of it? What shall we tell her? What's the best lie to put over?' They say the devil's the father of lies. And I say the theatre's the home of lies."

"Well, really Dale, if you've come here to insult me in my own theatre——"

"I don't want to insult you. But you asked me here to concoct with you some lie that would save your face with Wade and Miss Lorillard. And I really won't do it."

"Then you shouldn't have let me in for all this trouble."

"I'm sorry I had to do that. But I had a good reason."

"What reason?" asked Champion, fixing his eyes on Dale.

"I can't tell you, Champion," said Dale, returning his gaze.

There was a moment—to Dale it seemed very long—of silence. Then Champion said, with no bluster in his voice:

"Boy, as you seem so mad after truth to-day——"

"Thank you for—to-day!"

"Cut it out then! As you seem so mad after truth here's a bit of truth for you to chew. As long as I hold your play for over here no woman shall act the big part in it but Miss Morris. And as I told you I'm willing any time—to-day if you like—to buy the world rights of it."

"For her?"

"I don't say that."

"To keep her from getting them?"

"Why should I want to keep her from getting them?"

Again there was a silence between the two men. It was broken at last by Champion who said:

"Is she trying to buy them from you?"

"No."

"Let me have them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You might want to turn them over to Maud Eden."

"That's as much as you know about it!"

A devil of sheer incaution took possession of Dale, absolute possession, and he said:

"I know more about it than you've given me credit for, Champion. You left Switzerland thinking me a bigger fool than I really am."

For once in his life Champion looked uncomfortable. He lowered his eyes, twisted his large, loose and very pale lips, even moved his hands as if a physical discomfort had taken hold on him.

"I don't know what you mean!" he said.

He waited a minute, then lifted his big head with determination.

"All this don't get us any further."

"I think it does. We understand one another better now than we did when I came here to-day. At least you understand me better."

"You're the oddest proposition I ever struck, except perhaps Miss Morris."

Dale said nothing in response to this, and after a pause Champion said :

" Well, what are we going to do about Lorillard ? "

" Write out a cable that we'll both put our names to."

" And what'll it be ? "

" ' Holding over play indefinitely this is final greetings '—and our names. I'd rather tell Miss Lorillard why you're holding the play, but at any rate there won't be an absolute lie in that cable."

" Old Wade'll be mad."

" Why ? He's never even read the play."

" No, but when an old man of sixty-five's got a—well, put your own word—on a girl like Lorillard it ain't very pleasant for him to see her turned down. He'll get it in the neck from her more likely than not."

" Can't be helped if he does."

" You've put me wrong with old Georgie Wade. That's as certain as the Bank."

" Then you'll send that cable ? "

Champion shrugged his huge shoulders. When the cable had been written out and given to Meyer to despatch to America Dale said to Champion :

" Now we're quits, Champion."

" Quits ? "

Champion hesitated, seemed about to put a question to Dale, moved uneasily, then lifted his powerful voice and roared :

" Take off your ambers, Wiltford ! They made the whole crowd look like those Bible chumps that footed it in the fiery furnace ! "

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHEN Dale left the Central Theatre he walked to the Garrick Club. There he came across a man whom he knew slightly, who had lived for many years in Egypt, and who was an authority on Egyptian antiquities.

To this man, Archibald Langton, he mentioned that he thought of going to the Nile, though he hadn't yet been able to make up his mind to leave London.

"Have you ever been there?" Langton asked him.

"Never."

"Take my advice then, and go. Don't let anything prevent you."

Dale sat down with Langton and they entered into a long conversation which soothed Dale's nerves inexpressibly after his interview with Champion. They talked of Egypt and of things Egyptian, and presently Langton mentioned a name Dale knew nothing about, Neferhotep.

"He lived in Tutankhamen's time. He was a minstrel."

Langton, a man of much the same build as Dale, with a clean shaven face and pale grey eyes, looked for a moment at the waves of Dale's smoke undulating into space from the tip of his cigar.

"Here are some of his words which I—" he hesitated, glanced at Dale, looked away—"like."

"Yes?" said Dale.

The pale grey eyes had become imaginative. The face held a new look of almost strange gravity.

"I have heard those songs which are inscribed in the ancient sepulchres and what they tell in praise of life on earth and belittling the region of the dead. Yet wherefore do they this in regard to the land of Eternity, the just and the fair, where fear is not? Wrangling is its abhorrence, nor does any there gird himself against his fellow. That land, free of enemies!—all our kinsmen from the earliest days of time rest within it. The children of millions of millions come thither, everyone. For none may tarry in the land of Egypt; none there is that passeth not thither. The span of our earthly deeds is as a dream; but fair is the welcome that awaits him who has reached the hills of the West."

A long silence followed the falling of his level voice. At that moment it happened that the club was almost deserted. For the moment Dale and he were alone.

"May I—may I take that down?" asked Dale, at last speaking.

"Yes, of course."

"One minute!"

Dale went to a writing-table and took a pen and a sheet of paper.

When he got up to leave the club a little later he gripped Langton's hand.

"You've done me good to-day," he said. "More good than you know."

"If you decide to go to the Nile send me word. I can give you two or three introductions that you'll be glad to have."

"I'll ask you for them, be sure of that."

Late that day, just before closing time, Dale once more confronted the business-like phalanx at Cook's, and arranged for a passage to Alexandria from Trieste on a boat called the *Vienna*. Then he went home.

In his library, sitting over the fire, he read again the words of the Egyptian minstrel, and an intense longing came to him to hear them spoken by the dark voice of Valentine. That voice he felt, was made for such words as those. Again and again he read them and the longing grew in him, till at last he could hold out—against Valentine?—no longer, and he went to his table, copied out the words, and wrote the following note :

"DEAR VALENTINE,

"I am going to Egypt for a visit at the end of next week 'out of this darkness.' The words I enclose on a separate sheet are the words of an Egyptian minstrel, Neferhotep, who lived in the time of Tutankhamen. Needless to inquire whether you care for them, as I do. I would give a very great deal to hear your voice speak them. As you said to me—the universal gives one wings.

"MARTIN."

He sent off this note by the evening post. On the following morning between noon and one o'clock a messenger boy brought an answer from Valentine.

(written in bed.)

"Oh, Martin, my dear, what words! I was dancing nearly all last night and am only just awake. But I am *really* awake because I have read those words. They made me cry as Ecclesiastes makes me cry. I will say them to you before you go—only to you. Not to-day. Not to-morrow. Come on Sunday at twilight. Be sure to come. I have been angry with you but 'wrangling is its

abhorrence nor does any there gird himself against his fellow. That land, free of enemies !' Oh, Martin, why can't we be kind when our time here is so short ? I'm not old and I think I'm frightened of death. Perhaps I'm not—but I think I am. But there are things in life that make me long sometimes for the hills of the West.

" VALENTINE."

Dale returned the answer :

" DEAR VALENTINE,

" I will come at twilight.

" MARTIN."

On the Sunday, when the grey day of winter was beginning to fail, and such light as there was to diminish mysteriously, he stood once again at Valentine's door. Snow was falling, had just begun to fall thinly. The emptiness of Sunday possessed the great town. There was a still melancholy along the grey streets. A maid, new to Dale, let him in to the warmth of a hall faintly perfumed with amber. Looking round quickly he noticed changes in the house. There were more " things " about. The clever and expensive simplicity Dale had formerly felt at home with and admired had given place not to any exhibition of bad taste, not to any actual vulgarity, but to a more definite luxury. And this note of definite luxury was also apparent in the long living-room on the ground floor. It seemed to Dale that there were more cushions, more pictures, more ornaments, than there had been. The colours too, were different. The arrangement of the furniture had been changed. And what quantities of flowers there were ! Too many flowers.

He stood by the fire and looked round. And he said to himself :

" If I saw this room for the first time I should guess it was the room of a very successful actress."

The copper colour of Valentine's hair seemed to be repeated subtly by this, still beautiful, room.

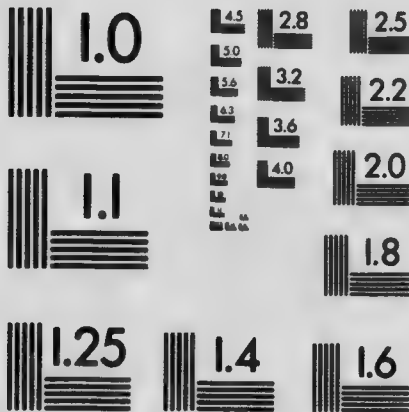
" She has come away from simplicity ! " he thought, sadly.

And she had had such a true understanding of the value, the preciousness, of simplicity both in art and in life. It was she who had said to him, long ago : " Most actresses I know aim at



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dressing up a part, *making* it—I aim at undressing it.” And she, too, had said, “I have a desire to strip things, to show them exactly as they are in their nakedness.” There was no nakedness here. It seemed to him that since he had been in this house she had had it dressed up. Beautifully of course, but——

Valentine came in. She looked haggard. Her beauty had always been of the haggard type, but now she was obviously not only a woman who belonged to a type but a woman with a weariness in her. Nevertheless, with her snort hair, she looked young. And as she came up to Dale and said, “Martin—dear!” she had surely recaptured simplicity. She even looked wistful, as the winter twilight was wistful, under the softly falling snow. He held both her hands. At that moment he was deeply moved and felt fundamental—man, rather than Martin Dale.

“Twilight!” she said. “But the twilight will soon be gone. Sit there by the fire. Don’t look at the snow beyond that window. Put your head back—so that it rests. All your body must be resting, Martin—dear Martin. You read those lovely words, or you heard them. I don’t know. And you had to send them to me. I know why. Because, through it all, we understand and care for the same beautiful things. And a similar love and understanding of beauty, Martin, is a link between two beings that nothing can quite break through. I have been angry with you and you, surely—surely—have been angry with me. But, when you came upon those words, you knew—I must tell her. *She* must know them, too. I cannot let her not know them now that I know them.’ And so you sent them to me.”

She went away from him for a few steps, and stood by the fire, and rested a hand, her left hand, on the high mantel piece of dark wood. And he felt her just then as a very sincere woman, not thinking at all of herself. And after a moment of silence she said, in her dark coloured voice that reminded him of a viola,

“I have heard those songs which are inscribed in the ancient sepulchres, and what they tell in praise of life on earth and belittling the region of the dead . . .”

She did not look at him while she spoke. She looked down, with her head a little bent, like a woman in deep meditation. And he knew that she was absorbed and he felt her as one very far away.

. . . "For none may tarry in the land of Egypt . . . The span of our earthly deeds is as a dream . . ."

He knew he would never love any other voice as he loved her voice.

. . . "him who has reached the hills of the West."

She stood still for a long time by the fire looking down after her voice had ceased, for so long that at last even he began to wonder. It was getting dark now. The winter twilight faded so quickly under the falling snow. Wasn't her tall, thin figure shaking a little?

"Valentine—dear?"

But she said nothing.

He wanted to get up and go to her, but something held him back, something imperious. He dared not go to her just then. Perhaps she was shaken by some violent emotion and was trying to dominate it. Or perhaps she was wrapped in thought and had forgotten him. He didn't know. And the twilight faded rapidly and the firelight seemed to grow in the too luxurious room.

"For none may tarry in the land of Egypt."

She spoke again, now in a very low and, it seemed to him, deeper voice, a voice full of fate.

"The span of our earthly deeds . . . is as a dream."

At last she lifted her head and looked towards him.

"Martin, why do I speak Constantine's words, why do I have to speak them? You don't know what it is to speak great words as they should be spoken. Did I speak those words beautifully, inevitably, in the *only* way? For there's an *only* way always in art."

"Yes, you did."

"I think I did, because I felt them, I feel them, in my spirit, deep down in my spirit, where there is truth."

She sat down in front of the fire near him.

"Were you trembling just now, Valentine?" he asked her.

"Yes. I was crying inside. There are things in the Bible that always make me cry inside, and things in Shakespeare. And I act in a play of Constantine's. Don't you think that when we speak, or read, great words, and feel how great they are, we are really feeling our own greatness and the greatness of God?"

"Perhaps."

"I think we are. But how difficult it is for us to give

ourselves to our own greatness, holding nothing back. I am being hateful."

Dale put out a hand to hers.

"Don't say that."

"But it's true. If I didn't know it it wouldn't matter so much. But I do know it. People who were ready to love me, real people, despise me now. And I despise myself."

"I don't despise you."

"Because you are good. But you wonder at me. You think 'how can she?'"

He didn't deny that.

"And those who love offal—and oh, there are so many of them, Martin!—crowd round me and applaud me. I give them offal. I stretch out both my hands to them and my hands are full of offal. And they take it and give me money for it. But I spend all their money quickly. I don't keep it. I get rid of it quickly. Such money must be spent quickly. How long will this go on?"

"If you hate it all so much can't you break away from it?"

"I have tied myself up—legally."

"For long?"

"For five years."

"To whom?"

"To Carrie and Mark."

"Oh!"

It was almost a groan, though Dale didn't know that.

"Yes!" she said, in answer.

"You can't break it?"

"Only by what they call mutual consent."

"And—and of course they——"

"Mark never loved me. He couldn't really love anyone. But now he is beginning to hate me."

"If it is so I know why."

"Such a reason!" she said, in a tone almost of despair.

"Such an awful reason! They like *my* offal too much."

"And Miss Geean?"

"Carrie? She's been very kind to me always. But I'm terribly disappointed in her."

"Why?"

"You know she has taste and understanding."

"Yes."

"And she has a love of beautiful things. It's almost a mania with her. I believe it is a mania. She's really like someone out of Balzac. D'you know what I mean, Martin?"

Dale nodded.

"She's obsessed by *things*. She has a fierce greed for possessing things. Under her seeming gentleness Carrie's really fierce."

"And under her seeming youth she's really old," Dale couldn't help saying.

"Old?" Valentine said, in a voice that sounded startled.

"Yes. She's old."

"How do you know?"

"Because I danced with her."

"Danced!"

"Yes, at Ciro's. And when I took hold of her, her body told me—'I am old'."

"Oh—Martin!"

She moved her hand in his.

"You make me almost afraid of you. I've always thought Carrie wasn't old, really old. I thought she was about thirty-eight or forty."

"What does it matter?"

"No. But—I feel almost as if it were horrible."

"You say she's fierce and you are disappointed in her."

"I'm disappointed, because she knows what is fine, what is right in art. She has a natural *flair*. But she has a love of money which overrides everything else in her. She hates what I am doing really. She doesn't say so. She has never said so. But I know she does. But she is making money out of it, and she is satisfied. D'you know what Carrie really is?"

"What?"

"She is a savage materialist wrapped up in satin. I believe she came to me when *you* did—the first time—because she scented that I would be a money-maker. And now I am making money for her. She used Mark to get me. Carrie is very clever."

"I always suspected she was."

"And she is a wonderful business woman. An American, a man I met a little while ago, told me her nickname among the very few Americans who know her at all well is 'Wall Street'."

"Does she avoid Americans?"

"Sometimes I think she does."

"She has a history. I wonder what it is."

"I don't know. Carrie is like one of those safes which you can't open unless you know the right word. I hate the way she has of looking on me now. She values me as a money maker. I am so much per cent on the money she has put into the London Playhouse. There are men who undress a woman with a look."

"I know."

"Carrie has a look I hate even more than that. It says, 'Your money value to me is so much'."

"Oh, if I could only get you away from these people!"

Dale took away his hand from hers and got up. A sudden restlessness had seized him. He wanted to do something, to do it immediately.

"Can't something be done?"

"You can't do anything. Besides——"

"Yes?"

"Besides now——" she paused. "You know Caliban told me!"

"About my cables?"

"Yes."

"You told me to find another actress."

"Yes, I know."

"Are you angry because I did?"

"Can she do it—right?"

"She could do it."

"As I could?"

"No—never!"

"You wrote it for me. Why d'you wish someone else to have it? Was it because you are in a hurry to have it produced?"

"No."

"Was it because you liked her very much?"

"Oh, no!"

"Was it because——"

But she didn't finish that sentence. And he didn't ask her to finish it, or try to find out what the end was going to be. Instead he said to her:

"Champion asked me to let him have the world rights of the play."

"Don't do that."

"No, I won't."

A silence fell between them. The twilight had faded now, and it was dark outside. The scent of flowers was very strong in the room. The firelight showed on the wall which was no longer golden brown, but which had been painted in shades of varying blue.

"Caliban is finer than Carrie," Valentine said at last. "If I were with him he wouldn't let me sell my gift for money basely. He would try to protect my gift, to develop it. I know that."

When she said that Dale felt afraid.

Little Brian came into the room presently. He was excited to see Uncle Martin again. Dale thought he looked oddly flushed and not at all strong. When he had been fetched by the nurse Dale asked Valentine a question which had been often in his mind.

"Do you care for Brian?" he said.

"Why do you ask a mother such a question?"

"I oughtn't to, I know. But—with you——"

"Martin, I'll tell you something I've never told anyone."

"About Brian?"

"Yes. Sometimes I don't know whether I love him or not."

"That's very strange."

"Yes. Perhaps you think it incredible."

"Scarcely anything is incredible when one comes to human nature. But I don't quite understand."

"Something in me loves him, I believe, loves him almost intolerably as it with entrails; but there's something else in me which criticises him coldly, cruelly, as one doesn't, can't criticise what one loves entirely. Often I look at Brian only with my brain—can I? I seem to——And I see Mark in him, Mark's unloveliness, Mark's lack of understanding and lack of power to love, even Mark's commonness. Mark was very cruel to me about Brian. He—he didn't wish Brian to be at all. And—isn't it strange?—Brian detests him. It's as if Brian knew. 'You wanted to suppress me. You would have suppressed me if you could. But I came in spite of you.' Mark tried—when he saw what a success I was and thought my success would grow—he tried to fascinate Brian by being nice to him. But Brian only loathed him the more. And now——"

"Yes—now?"

"Now he doesn't bother any more because he is getting to hate me. He is terribly jealous of me, but only in the theatre."

An extraordinarily bitter expression came into her face as she said the last words.

He isn't jealous of me as a woman. He is jealous of me as an actress. You saw the other night."

Dale thought of the good-looking dark man she had danced with so often, wondered about him painfully.

"Is Brian quite well?" he asked, abruptly.

"Don't you think he looks well?" she said, rather sharply.

"No."

"He's a nervous child. He was born in very bad circumstances. Sometimes I think he is marked by them—branded."

"Does London suit him?"

"Perhaps not. He is very excitable. London! And I'm not a serene mother. I'm a dancing actress, not a mother. I can't be quiet—now, except for a little while with you."

Dale had a feeling then that if only Valentine could love him, could succeed in loving him, he would be able to help her as no other man could. He believed, genuinely believed, that he understood her as no other man did except possibly—he didn't know—Father Bexland. He was sure he loved her as no other man did. And because of that, of his understanding and of his loving, he had the conviction that he could make her life absolutely right for her if only she could love him. Why couldn't she?

He was driven to ask her.

"But I do care very much for you," she said.

"Oh!"

Yes. When Caliban told me about your cables from New York it gave me a horrible shock. He saw it. I hadn't time to hide it."

"*That* isn't love!"

"But the shock was not because of the play, it was because I thought those cables must mean that you liked another woman better than you liked me, that perhaps you believed in another woman more than *now* you believed in me. I thought you must be deserting my talent for hers."

"Your *talent*! Your *talent*!"

He said it with exasperation.

"What has your talent got to do with it!"

"Think, Martin! Duse's talent, genius—it is Duse. It is as much a part of her—more—than her beautiful hands, her beautiful eyes, her strange look, her voice, her way of moving. It is them and not them. It is behind and beneath them, in them and of them. But it is much more than they are. Many men have loved fools. But there are many men who have loved not flesh containing a fool but genius giving life to flesh, making it wonderful. I feel sometimes I have a small flame of genius in me. And it's awful to fear that one whom I know as I know you may be deserting my altar. Martin, you will never understand, no one will ever understand, what misery it is to be unworthy of the big thing God has given you as I am unworthy. You say what has your love for me got to do with my talent? I tell you that you wouldn't love me without it. And you want to rescue me from my prostitution of it because the artist in you is the Knight in you."

"And what about the *man*? The *man* whom you can't love?"

There came a faint tap on the door. It was followed, after a tiny interval, by a maid's light soprano voice saying:

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Trever is on the telephone wishing to speak to you."

"Forgive me, Martin!" said Valentine, getting up quickly.

CHAPTER XXXV

EGYPT is a land of forgetfulness for many. In Upper Egypt the perfect climate brings to the birth in sensitive Europeans a physical sense of well-being which reacts on the whole nature and has even the power sometimes to send a sorrow to sleep. There are days, windless days, when the Nile is as a dream and the Arabian mountains are dreamlike in the glittering distance; when the voice of the child, circling with the Sakyeh under the blazing blue, and

mingling with the antique cry of the wheel, has a sound as of unearthly things; when the stillness of the palms in the green land overshadowing the brown pigeon towers carries with it a sense of marvel. The black figures of women move through the intense brightness, which yet has softness in it, mysteriously, holding a fragment of robe between their lips, and mysteriously fade among the earthen walls of brown houses. The hawks slide through the blue, or sink to rest on the narrow masts of the boats. In the gold, the unwavering gold, there is the magic of a dream, despite the ardour of the crowded life in the green corridor which the great river divides and the two ranges of hills wall in.

Egypt calls a man not to sleep but to waking dreams.
It called to Dale.

He had never before been out of Europe, except on his visit to New York. The power to wonder, to be thrilled, was yet in him. And fortunately he was alone. He needed to be alone just then. Very soon after landing in Alexandria he went up the Nile, and after spending a fortnight in Aswan he settled in Luxor, putting up at the Luxor Hotel. The gaieties of the Winter Palace did not attract him. He wanted only Egypt, the—if that were possible—healing of Egypt. Solitude in darkness may be sinister, may even be terrible. He found solitude in Luxor just what he needed.

People thought him unsociable. He now had a name that was known. There were idle women and men who would have been glad to know him. But it was soon realised that this successful young playwright was very "uncompanionable." In the day-time he was always out, always away from the village. When the night life of the Winter Palace began he disappeared and was no more seen. He had a sitting-room. No doubt he shut himself up in it and read, or perhaps wrote, out of reach of the sound of fox-trots and the tangoes that would have reminded him of Valentine. Every day he was up very early. By sunrise he was out, riding a mare called Tricksy, or walking on the bank of the Nile between the Sultana's striped villa and the Savoy Hotel. But the Winter Palace was sleeping then. And when people came out he was gone on donkey-back to tombs, or temples, or mountains, or to the strip of desert, fringed by dusty tamarisk trees, that stretched beyond the little village of Biadreh. Often he would spend several hours there, lying on a rug in the eye of the

sun far out on the sun-baked earth, facing the hills that guard the Arabian desert. And always about one o'clock, if he looked towards the village, he would see a figure in a tattered garment, once white, approaching him carefully bearing a shrouded object, Abdou from the village with a tray holding a blue teapot, two little tumblers and a slab of sugar, destined for him and his donkey boy, Yessin.

He had chosen Yessin as his donkey boy because Yessin looked serious, and was very quiet in manner, kept apart from the other donkey boys who line up every morning on the river bank near the Temple of Luxor, and hadn't tried to attract his attention. And he soon realised that he had chosen well. For Yessin was really quiet and serious, honest, respectful, and at first totally untalkative. As day succeeded day, however, and the acquaintance between them inevitably grew, Yessin showed that he could talk, and in English which Dale was able to understand. And his conversation often interested Dale and kept him from thinking too much when he was out in the fringe of desert trying to win forgetfulness by drowning himself in the rays of the sun.

Yessin frequently spoke about religion. For he was a howling dervish and deeply religious. He never smoked and never drank alcohol. On Friday nights he took part in the religious exercises of the howling dervishes, and sang till late in the night. One day Dale noticed that he had a cough, enquired about it, and learned that Yessin had been up at four in the morning taking a cold bath in connection with his religion. His faith was obviously deep and unquestioning. It made Dale think about Valentine's faith, and about his own lack of definite faith. Could he even say, with that sincerity which he valued so much, "I believe—help thou my unbelief"?

Although he began to be happier than he had recently been in Europe Dale found himself very often thinking of Valentine, and usually in connection with the beauty, the enticement and the strangeness of this land of many seductions. He saw from time to time, he could not help seeing, travelling women from the hotels, busily and happily occupied in seeing Egypt. His immediate instinct was to avoid them. But when he was, as he was very often, in the valley of the Tombs of the Kings, or far up in the sun-scorched recesses of the Lybian mountains, or among the lonely Tombs of the Queens, or sailing up the Nile towards the orange gardens, or dropping

down towards Luxor in the afterglow, or watching the moon in the Temple of Ammon at Karnak, his sense of beauty wanted Valentine's sense of beauty as his companion, and he knew how right she had been in speaking of the unbreakable link which a similar feeling of beauty forges between two people.

And especially he wanted her when he was out in the desert-land beyond Biadreh, with his back to the glade of dusty tamarisk trees and the village of "holy people"—Yessin's name for the inhabitants of Biadreh, whether warranted or unwarranted Dale didn't know—and his face towards the hills of Arabia. Yessin, in his black robe, with bare feet and a white turban with a long end hanging loose over his right shoulder, sat near him and was silent or perhaps talked of religion in a low and level voice, and Dale lay, or crouched, on his rug, and gazed at the sunshine, and savoured the dryness, and felt the distance and the regions beyond. Sometimes he only heard the soft voice without listening. And he looked at the unearthly mountains far off, and in thought, put Valentine beside him, drew her into the sharing of his silence and his contemplation of those mountains, a whisper of outlines along the fringes of the desert. And when Yessin's voice fell into silence sometimes he heard her dark-coloured voice saying, "For none may tarry in the land of Egypt . . . the span of our earthly deeds is as a dream."

One day, as he listened to this voice, he saw in the distance of the waste a tall figure shrouded in black moving slowly alone through the brightness towards the Arabian mountains. Slowly, with an intent decision, as if impelled by some great purpose, it went on and on, fading into the sun. Dale watched it diminishing gradually, but always retaining its dignity, its air of being impelled, drawn on irresistibly towards something which was summoning it. Then he heard Yessin's voice say:

"Him fellaheen woman."

He started. A strange illusion of the mind had taken hold of him. He had felt that the shrouded woman was Valentine, going away in the vast distance, leaving, obliged by some interior command to leave, the land of Egypt. Yessin's voice dispelled the illusion. He looked up and answered:

"Yes, I know. Where is she going?"

"I dunno where him going," replied Yessin with soft indifference. "Nothin' there!"

"But," Dale thought. "There must be something there to draw that dark figure on."

And a feeling came to him that Valentine was, perhaps, being drawn subtly on by some force, some attraction invisible, towards a region where, to the casual onlooker, there might seem to be nothing, but where she knew there was something tremendous.

One day he wrote a long letter to her telling her of the beauty and the strangeness of the Valley of the Nile, and he was led, against his own will as it seemed to him, towards the end of the letter to tell her of his visits to the desert beyond Biadreh, and of his imagining connected with her.

"I think of you in all places, but it's only in that one place that I once seemed to see you, robed in black like a fellaheen woman, going out slowly into the waste towards the Arabian mountains. Really I saw a fellaheen woman, but I had the definite feeling that I was watching you. And I heard your voice saying, 'For none may tarry in the land of Egypt . . . the span of our earthly deeds is as a dream.'"

Rather to his surprise he received a long answer from her, written over several sheets of blue paper in her large characteristic handwriting, that looked clear but that wasn't at all easy to read.

"Why do you write like that to me, Martin? To me, who have never been out of my country except once to Paris! I've always been working, and always in towns. Do you want to disturb me? Do you want to make me unhappy by telling me of your happiness in that wonderful land of Egypt? I think I'm afraid of your Biadreh dreaming among the tamarisk trees. And why do you see me going out alone into the waste robed in black, going away into brightness? What does it mean. This comes from some preoccupation of your mind, or from some secret suspicion of what may come. You almost make me afraid.

"Here life is shoddy and tumultuous. Think of that, Martin—a shoddy and tumultuous life! And Brian isn't

well at all. He seems to get more nervous every day, and he dreams at night as a child shouldn't dream at his age, tragically of dark things. I don't believe I'm good for him. There's something in me that reacts upon him injuriously. Mother would take him to the sea. I've given her a bungalow at Birchington. But I can't make up my mind to let him go—not just yet. The horrible play crowds the house. Will it ever not crowd it? It can't be taken off till the receipts drop below twelve hundred pounds in three successive weeks. That's in our contract with Carrie. So if it doesn't drop we can never take the play off. I'm so sick of it, and I hate it so, that going on every evening is a nightmare to me worse than the nightmares Brian has. And when I wake on matinée mornings I feel absolutely desperate. Mark said to me the day before yesterday, after two crammed performances, that the play was 'becoming a classic.' Oh, Martin dear! If I could be at Biadreh with you! And yet I'm afraid of that place beyond the dusty tamarisk trees. Why did you see me robed in black? And where was I going? Loving thoughts.

“VALENTINE.”

“Yesterday, Sunday, I dined with the Champions in the 'mansion'. I had never been in it before. It made me feel elaborate, like some one dressed in turquoise plush, with ostrich feathers in her head, and bangles and brooches all over her. Mrs. Champion thinks I'm a great actress now. She said to me, 'You've found your right line at last, Miss Morris dear. It doesn't do in these days to be caviar to the general.' Oh, Martin! Was I ever caviar to the general? And, oh Martin, who was he?”

When a man in love receives a letter from the woman he loves, a rare letter, he reads it uncounted times, reads it when he knows it by heart. Dale brooded over Valentine's letter. He sat in his little sitting-room in the Luxor Hotel at night and his eyes travelled over the lines of big handwriting again and again. He found something in the letter to sadden him, something even which woke and set walking in him the shadow of fear.

“Some secret suspicion of what may come”—those words made him uneasy. Was something preparing in Valentine, something mysterious which had prompted his curious fancy

in the desert? And what was the matter with little Brian, the unwanted child? Had Valentine wanted him? When he had come, against the will of the father who had never acknowledged him to anyone but his mother, so far as Dale knew, she had been brave about him. She had shown moral courage in never trying to hide the fact that she had borne an illegitimate child. Apparently she had been proud of Brian. But had he really been a burden laid on her life? Acceptance, even proud acceptance, of the inevitable need not mean joy in it. Dale hadn't forgotten Valentine's confession to him about Brian on a Sunday afternoon in the twilight. Perhaps she loved Brian. Perhaps she even loved him very much. But she was evidently afraid of the Mark Trever lurking in him, of the false note which time might set sounding in him. Dale imagined her watching her boy with detective's eyes, trembling lest the ugly faults of the man she had so strangely been forced to love should reappear in him.

The postscript about the dinner at the Champion's house distressed Dale. Once he had almost detested Champion. Now he didn't, perhaps, actually detest him, at any rate he didn't wholly detest him. But he had begun to be seriously afraid of him. There was something inexorable in Champion. He was coarse, vulgar, uneducated, uncultivated, lecherous and temperamentally a bully. But he wasn't negligible. He counted for something. Purpose informed him. Will was strong in him. And—and this in spite of his gift for trickery and his readiness to lie—there was a sort of ground swell of sincerity in him. Dale's sincerity recognised that, and acknowledged it, and was afraid of it, more afraid of it than of anything else in Champion.

Why had Valentine gone to that house? The fact that she had done so proved a weakening of will in her, and a weakening of will before Champion's. Once she had carelessly and insolently rejected the attempts of friendship made from the "mansion." Even when, merely out of politeness, she ought, perhaps, to have gone there she had flatly refused to go. Now, when no sort of obligation was on her, she went. Dale knew what that meant. It meant that a secret persistence in Champion had achieved part of its object.

Yes, Dale began to be afraid of Champion.

A few days after Dale had received Valentine's letter he rode again with Yessin to the desert beyond Biadreh, taking his post, which came in just as he was starting, with him neatly

packed by Yessin on the top of the wooden lunch basket. Yessin spread the blue rug on the warm hard earth, laid Dale's post on it carefully, the letters together, the newspapers beside them, set the lunch basket down a little way off, then went to hobble the donkeys. Meanwhile Dale lay down at full length, rested his face on his hands, pressing his elbows against the ground, and looked towards the most distant mountains.

Eternal summer ! How wonderfui it was ! Always the sun and the brilliant blue, indigo where the mountain edge cut into it. What would she be out here far away from the darkness ? *Une boîte de surprises*, what surprise would she reveal in the blaze of this Egyptian sun ? It was strange, very strange, how she seemed to know what she had surely never learned. Thinking of her he could scarcely believe what nevertheless he knew, that she had never travelled, had, until quite recently, never lived even comfortably, never met cultivated people, never known beautiful surroundings. From where had she got her native authority, her dominating self-possession, her ease among those of a breed to which she no doubt didn't belong ? Perhaps from some father, now dead, or disappeared ? Dale had never heard her allude to her father. Perhaps she, like little Brian, was an illegitimate child. Her mother had certainly been very good looking. Perhaps——

"How little I know about her !" he thought. "And yet how intimately we know each other. She has a touch of genius. It is that which gives her authority, a certain queer sort of breeding, ease among cultivated people not at all of her world."

And he remembered that party of hers.

But now she went to parties given by Trever. How amazing that she could go on loving—if it was love—Trever ! Dale could understand a young girl falling in love with Trever. But he could not understand a woman of Valentine's understanding, painfully clear understanding, continuing to love Trever. There was surely, under all the authority and self-possession, a good deal of the slave in Valentine, too much of the slave that still exists in many women, in spite of all the feminine self-assertion, the heart-rending cries of uneasy men who fear that dominion is passing from them.

"Lunshin, sir ?" said Yessin.

Dale let the mountains go, turned round on his side.

"I'll just look at the post first."

He opened and read his letters, then turned to the papers. The first paper he took up was the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*. He looked at the news in the right hand middle page. There was a great deal about France and French politics; something about the Prince of Wales . . . a certain politician's pipe . . . Mdlle. Lenglen renders first aid to a tennis champion at the Beaulieu Tennis Club. . . .

Far enough away it all seemed in the desert beyond Biadreh!

An actress loses her child.

The only child of Miss Valentine Morris, the famous actress, at present appearing with Mr. Mark Trever in Mr. Constantine's popular play, "The Main Business of Life," died yesterday of meningitis after a very brief illness.

Dale looked up after a while, and saw Yessin's very bright brown eyes, surrounded by yellow, fixed upon him.

"Lunshin, sir?"

Dale shook his head.

"No—no."

He got on to his feet. He couldn't lie there on the rug in the sun any longer. He couldn't eat—he knew he couldn't. He remembered a play he had once seen in Paris. A man at the telephone had heard his wife, a long way off, attacked by a ruffian, probably an apache, had heard her screams to him for help, had heard her—silence. He was in a Paris drawing-room taking coffee with friends. She was over a hundred miles away in a lonely house hidden in a forest. Dale had never forgotten the expression of horror on the actor's face, as he dropped the receiver, and dashed frantically out of the drawing-room, watched by his terror-stricken friends. An utterly useless instinct to help a loved one had driven that man almost mad. And here in the desert beyond Biadreh a perhaps equally useless instinct was stirring in Dale.

"Yessin!"

"Yes, my gentleman."

"Get the donkeys! I must go back to Luxor. There's something in the papers—get the donkeys!"

"Yes, sir."

He walked quietly away over the dry dusty ground towards

the hobbled beasts. Dale stood where he was, waiting. And he seemed to hear Valentine's voice saying,

"For none may tarry in the land of Egypt."

But that was a comment not on his fate but on the fate of a little boy.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"WE can't possibly refuse her a fortnight," said Miss Geean, in her soft voice to Mark Trever, in the managers' room at the London Playhouse.

"No, of course not. And Miss Carrington's quite ready to take her place. She's been thoroughly rehearsed. She'll be all right. Don't you worry."

Miss Geean smiled faintly, and stroked the head of the marvellous little white Pomeranian who was nestling under her chinchilla covered arm.

"I'm not much given to worrying, Mark."

"I know you aren't. You're too damned intelligent for that. Of course I'm most awfully sorry about that poor little kid—I wonder who his father was by the way."

"She never mentions him."

"Some actor fellow mixed up with her in her early days in the Provinces before anyone'd ever heard of her, I expect."

Trever's big blue eyes were on Miss Geean; her grey eyes looked very vague as they met them.

"Probably. What were you going to say?"

"—only that though I'm so awfully cut up about the poor little kid her being out of the bill will give us a chance to test things."

"Test things?"

"Yes; to find out whether she's such a draw as she really thinks she is."

"That's true."

"Personally—I may be quite wrong of course—but personally I don't think there'll be much of a drop in the business."

"I hope not. We got through Christmas so marvellously."

"And I think—mind you I may be wrong—I think we shall have big houses all the time she's away. Luckily I shan't be out of the bill. Come in!"

A pale young man, with a servile expression and manner, came in with a letter in his hand.

"This has just come, sir, from Miss Morris."

"Any answer?"

"No, sir."

"Leave it."

The pale young man humbly laid the letter down and went out.

"Perhaps this is to ask for more leave," said Trever. "No doubt she's awfully broken."

He opened the letter, glanced at it and frowned.

"Well—for a *mother*! Look at that, Carrie! What d'you say to that?"

Miss Geean stretched out a hand covered by a long white suede glove, took the letter and read:

"I said I must go away for a fortnight. I was talking nonsense. I intend to go on working. You can expect me to-night. V.M."

"What do you think of that?" said Trever, with obviously intense irritation. "Why the child isn't even buried! He died late on Saturday night after the performance, and now it's only Monday afternoon. She can't appear. It would make an awful impression on the public. Besides, there's Miss Carrington to think of. She's expecting to get her chance to-night. We must forbid Val's going on."

"I don't think we can. It isn't in her contract that we can stop her appearing."

"Damn her contract! This is a question of decent human feeling. I don't pretend to be any better than other people, but to appear before the public when your son's lying dead, and not even underground! No, that's too much! If she comes——"

"She will come if she says she will. I know Valentine."

"Then I shall stop her going on the stage. For her own sake I shall stop her. I shall tell Miss Carrington she's to dress and make up in good time and be all ready to go on. Val always comes at the last moment. When she does I shall

tell her it's all settled and that she can't disappoint Miss Carrington."

"I really don't think that Miss Carrington need enter into this question," said Miss Geean, with a distinct sound of dryness in her soft voice. "If the principal is in the theatre the understudy can't expect to go on."

"I know, I know! It isn't Miss Carrington I'm thinking of, it's Val's position, it's her popularity with the public. Why a thing like this—I mean her acting while her boy's lying unburied—it might absolutely ruin her. People might think she'd no heart."

"Or they might think she had marvellous pluck."

"My dear Carrie, ask yourself! A *mother*! You know what a feeling an English audience has for motherhood. The risk would be too great. I daren't allow her to run it. Besides——"

"Yes? Besides——?"

"Well, I hardly care to speak about it, but between you and me I'm pretty sure this——" he gave the note he had just received an angry flip—"the writing of this was dictated by professional jealousy."

"How could it be?"

"I don't believe—I'm speaking to you in strict confidence——"

"Of course!"

"I don't believe she cares for me to have the chance of appearing in this play without her. If the play goes as well without her as with her why then her value drops at once. You see what I mean?"

Miss Geean stroked the Pomeranian's snow-white head gently. But she didn't say anything.

"What's the time?" said Trever.

He pulled out his watch.

"God, it's close on six o'clock! I say, Carrie, couldn't you go round in your car and——"

"I haven't the time. I've got Andrew Crane and his wife dining with me at a quarter to seven before the theatre. I'm bringing them here."

"Crane, the great cotton man?"

"Yes."

"I should like him to see Miss Carrington. He's at the back of more than one West End theatre."

Miss Geean got up.

"I leave this to you," she said, without any apparent feeling. "But I think if Valentine were to appear to-night it would be a marvellous advertisement for the play."

"What do we want with an advertisement at this time of day?" exclaimed Trever, with a sudden roughness that was coarse.

The Pomeranian began to bark violently.

"What the——"

"He thought you were going to attack me—perhaps," said Miss Geean, again with that dry sound in her voice.

Then she turned and walked slowly out of the room, carrying the still barking dog with her.

Directly the door was shut behind her Trever went to the telephone and asked for a number. When he was put through he said,

"Who's that speaking? . . . Oh! I want to speak to Miss Morris at once. It's very important. Mr. Trever is speaking. Mark Trever speaking from the London Playhouse . . . Gone out! Where to? *Where's* she gone? . . . Then what *do* you know . . . Is she dining at home? . . . She is *not* dining at home!—Well, she must be dining somewhere!

. . . Oh very well! . . . *Very well!*"

"Devil take the fool!"

He hung up the receiver.

"Damn the woman!"

He looked again at his watch. At this moment there was a knock at the door.

"*Come in!*" he said savagely.

The door opened, an extremely good-looking dark girl, with a pouting mouth and provocative eyes appeared.

"Oh, Miss Carrington, it's you! Shut the door, please!"

"Is it all right, Mr. Trever? Am I to play?"

"Of course you are. I told you so."

"I was only wondering. I heard there was a note from Miss Morris."

"You're going to play to-night. Don't be afraid—and, look here, Andrew Crane's going to be in the house."

"Oh! *what* a chance for me! Did *you* arrange that?"

"What do you think?"

There was a silence. Then she said, very gently and with obvious reluctance releasing herself from Trever's arms:

"You are a trump, Mark."

"Only just found that out—after Brighton?"

"Sh—sh?"

"Go and dress and make up at once."

"But——"

"At once! Don't argue! It's all for your own good. And now I must get some dinner."

He rang, and as she went out, flushed under her paint and smiling triumphantly, she heard him ordering some food and champagne to be brought to his room at once.

While he was hastily eating and drinking, the servile young man, whose name was Roy Smith-Archer, and who had been an unsuccessful actor in the Provinces, came in with an air of pale secrecy.

"What is it now?" said Trever.

"Excuse me, sir, but I thought I ought to let you know Miss Morris has just arrived."

Trever put down his glass.

"Miss Morris. Already?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is she?"

"She's gone to her dressing-room, sir."

"Did she—has she——"

"Sir?"

Trever didn't answer. He poured out some more wine, drank it, then got up from the table and looked at his watch. It was half-past six. The play didn't begin till eight-thirty. There was plenty of time.

"Are the slips printed about Miss Carrington playing to-night instead of Miss Morris?"

"Yes, sir. But now Miss Morris is here!"

"And what the devil's that got to do with you? Mind your own business or you'll find yourself hiked out of this theatre before you can look round. The slips are to be given out for the performance this evening. Miss Morris hasn't come here to act."

And then Trever, with a hard face, went resolutely out of the room. Outside the door he stopped and lighted a cigar. Then he walked down the passage, mounted a short flight of stairs, stoppd at a door, on which was printed in large letters "Miss Morris," and knocked. There was no answering call, and for a moment Trever stood waiting in the passage. Then the door was opened and Valentine stood there. She had on a plain black dress. Her short copper-coloured hair was

uncovered. She was pale. Her always rather haggard beauty looked now ravaged, as a woman's beauty is ravaged by prolonged sleeplessness and acute mental distress. A sort of startled expression showed, seemed indeed to be stamped, on her lips and quivered in her eyes. She looked much younger than usual, and Trever noticed that though he couldn't account for it.

"Good evening, Mark," she said, in a low but calm voice.

"What do you want?"

He took her left hand and pressed it gently.

"My poor girl!"

"Please don't," she said, taking her hand away quickly.

"But I——"

"I know! But you needn't say it. Thank you for your letter."

Somebody passed behind Trever in the passage.

"I want to talk to you for a moment. Let me come in."

She was standing in the doorway and for an instant she didn't move. She seemed to be hesitating, disinclined to let him in.

"Come, Val!" he said, with a change of voice. "I've got to talk to you. And you know as well as I do we can't discuss affairs in the passage."

Someone else passed behind him, and said, "Good evening, Miss Morris."

"Good evening," said Valentine. "Discuss—affairs?"

"I mean that I must speak to you about—let me come in."

"Very well."

She moved away. He walked in and immediately shut the door behind him.

They were in a long sitting-room, with a door at the far end over which a black silk curtain, embroidered in an elaborate oriental design in red, was drawn. Elephants and strange foliage and flowers appeared in this design. The room was a black and lacquer red room, and had been decorated and furnished for Valentine by a young artist called Timothy Lake, notorious in Chelsea for his daring talent and youthful hatred of what Chelsea calls the conventionalities. Black vases held red flowers. In the four corners of the room were red statuettes of Chinese wrestlers posed on black pedestals. Valentine had paid for the whole room. The contents of it were her property. She had got rid of a great deal of the

money paid to her for offal in the buying of this rather wonderful interior, which had been photographed many times, and had been painted by a great Irish painter with Valentine lying in it on an immense black sofa, with her head resting on a pile of lacquer red cushions and a little black pug sleeping beside her.

When Trever had shut the door Valentine said :

" You want to discuss affairs with me ? "

" First I want to tell you how my heart bleeds for you in——"

" Yes, yes—thank you ! And thank you for the flowers ! Thank you ! What affairs ? "

" Do sit down, Val. And let me ! I can't talk standing like this."

" Oh, very well."

She sat down in the chair nearest to her.

" Have you dined ? " he said, sitting down near her.

" No."

" Val, you must go home and dine, and—and go to bed."

" Go to bed ! I am going to act."

" No, you can't ! "

" Didn't you get my note ? "

" Yes. I tried to telephone you but you had gone out. I wanted to tell you that you can't possibly go on to-night."

" Why not ? "

" Ask yourself ! "

" No ; I'm asking you. Why can't I act to-night ? "

" Because—you know as well as I do."

" But I want you to tell me."

" Because it would be indecent."

" Indecent ? "

" Yes, indecent. I—I'm awfully sorry to have to say it but you force me to. Your child is dead, and isn't—isn't even—poor little kid, he's not even buried ! He's lying unburied. How can you possibly appear before the public ? "

" Oh ; then you are not acting to-night ! "

Trever's handsome face flushed.

" What d'you mean ? Of course I'm acting."

" Then you can be indecent but I mustn't ! "

" I ! There's no question about me."

" But I say there is. If it's indecent for the mother of a

dead child who isn't, as you say, *even buried*, to appear before the public it's equally indecent for the father to appear."

"This is unbearable. I won't stand it. I—I forbid you to say such things."

"Such things! But I am only saying what is true. Aren't you Brian's father? You have never denied it to me in all these years. You have never behaved like a father. You never did anything for him. But you have never denied that you are his father. Then how can you act to-night if I can't?"

There had come into her eyes full of sleeplessness a fierceness that startled him, that suggested to him an immediate necessity.

"You can't act to-night because it's too dangerous," he said, in an authoritative voice. "The public might hiss you."

"Hiss me! The British public! The British public hiss an actress because she has lost her only child! Have you acted all these years and know nothing about your own countrymen?"

"They would be outraged by your appearing before Brian's funeral. There might easily be a scene in the theatre. I'm not going to risk it. You yourself asked for a fortnight's rest. We've got your letter. We've had slips printed——"

"Slips!"

"Yes; saying that you can't appear to-night and that your rôle will be filled by Miss Carrington. I've told Miss Carrington she must go on to-night. We rehearsed her on Sunday directly we knew."

Valentine looked at Mark Trever, fixed upon him the tentacles of a woman's mercilessly seeing, mercilessly comprehending, mercilessly gathering up and coldly examining eyes. Tentacles! Yes, at that moment Trever felt that he was held by them, by tentacles of the eyes, unseen but physically experienced. Her silence seemed to him everlasting. But he was unable to break it. It seemed to him that he made several convulsive efforts to break it, but failed each time.

"Yes?" Valentine said at last.

"Miss Carrington is ready to go on to-night in your place. I'm the managing-director here. She will go on."

"Yes?"

"That's all. Now—my dear girl—go home and rest, and eat something. Don't—don't bother about the theatre. We'll keep the flag flying here."

"Oh!"

It was a sound like a long and deep sigh of dreadful understanding, and was followed by another silence during which those eyes full of sleeplessness and understanding never left Trever's face. But this time Trever broke it, was able to break it.

"Now, my poor girl——"

"Oh—please—please!"

"What is it?"

"Please don't call me that!"

"But——"

"You mustn't call me that!"

"I don't know what you—I'm only——"

"Don't explain—please! Tell me something. Tell me—why do you think I have come here to-night to act? Why do you think I wanted to act to-night?"

"Oh well—why talk about it?"

"No—please! We must! You must tell me. Why?"

"Oh, well—it's natural enough."

"Yes? Natural—yes?"

"Well, no actress wants to give a big chance to another actress, especially if she's good-looking."

"No—no? And what else? Please tell me!"

"Oh, come now—that's quite enough! We don't want to discuss things like this when—when that poor little kid——"

"Hush—please! What else?"

"Well, if you must have it, I don't suppose you care for me to get all the applause."

"Oh!"

Those terrible eyes were still fixed upon him. And now they began really to frighten him.

"Now you must go!" he said, more loudly, with an attempt after bold authority. "You can't possibly act to-night."

"No; I can't act to-night."

"That's right. I knew you'd see reason. And after all you've no need to be afraid. Miss Carrington's a fine girl with talent but she'll never cut you out. And as to me——"

"No, no! It's all right. I'm not afraid. Mrs. Blount!"

"Madam!"

THE BACCHANTE AND THE NUN 297

The door behind the black and red curtain opened; the curtain was pulled aside; Mrs. Blount appeared looking very grave and concerned.

"Please bring me my things."

"Your things, madam?"

"My hat and gloves and my fur coat. I'm going away."

"You're not going to act, madam?"

"Of course she isn't! Of course she can't act at present!" exclaimed Trever. "Bring her things!"

When Valentine had put them on, and Mrs. Blount, now looking definitely agitated, had retired to the dressing-room and shut the door, Trever said:

"And now go home and rest. And mind you eat something. You're looking tired out and no wonder after all you've been through, my poor——"

Her look stopped him.

"I mean—your car's gone, of course. I'll see you to a taxi, and——"

"Good——"

"But I'll ——"

"No—please."

She went to the door, put her hand on it, then stopped and turned round.

"I'd better tell you now."

"Tell me? What?"

"I shan't come here any more."

"What d'you mean?"

"I shall never come here again."

"Never—what d'you mean? We've got a contract with you for five years."

"Yes, I know. But I shall never come here again."

She looked away from him. Her eyes went all over the red and black room.

"I shall never see this terrible room again—never!"

Then she went out.

Trever didn't follow her.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WHEN Dale reached Luxor he wired to Valentine. In his telegram he said nothing about leaving Egypt. But he packed up and quitted Luxor by the evening train. On arriving at Cairo on the following morning he went at once to Thomas Cook and Son's office to see about the sailings to European ports. There was a ship—not the *Vienna*, but a sister ship—to Trieste in three days' time. He engaged a passage on her, then returned to Shephard's Hotel. He thought that he intended to write to Valentine. But he didn't write to her. It was easy to compose a telegram of sympathy and friendship. But he didn't know what to put in a letter. For he didn't know how this death which had startled him would affect Valentine. One thing certainly it must prove to her, whether she had loved her little illegitimate son deeply or not. With death would come knowledge, inexorable knowledge with inexorable death. But in his uncertainty Dale couldn't make up his mind how to word a letter to that strange mother. He couldn't write conventionally to Valentine; he could only write intimately. And as understanding must be at the back of all real intimacy, and he hadn't it, he sent no letter ahead of him from Egypt.

When the three days were over he sailed from Alexandria. He expected to be in London within a week but that wasn't to be. On board ship he abruptly developed influenza, and when they berthed at Trieste he was so ill that the ship's doctor forbade him to travel any further, and he was taken to the Savoy Hotel and put to bed. And there he remained for more than a fortnight, waiting for the tiresome complaint to run its course.

At first he was too ill to read. But when at last he began to get better and was able, wrapped in a dressing-gown with a rug over his short legs, to lie in a long chair near the window, he sent out a chasseur to buy him some English papers, any that could be found in Trieste. After a lengthy absence, the boy came back with a *Times*, two copies of the *Daily Mail*, and a Thursday's copy of the *Daily Telegraph*.

When Dale saw the word 'Thursday' printed at the top of the outer sheet of the *Telegraph* he pushed the other papers

away, opened it quickly with hands which felt oddly feeble, and turned to the theatrical news. He had a conviction that he would find something there about Valentine. And he wasn't disappointed. In the column of theatrical notes there were two dealing with her.

"With reference to the letter which I published last week from Miss Valentine Morris, stating that she had not left the London Playhouse, as was generally supposed, to take a brief rest after the sad death of her little boy, but that she had entirely severed her connection with that theatre, and under no circumstances meant to return to it, I have received a communication from Mr. Mark Trever, who is of course the managing-director of the theatre as well as the principal actor in Mr. Constantine's play, 'The Main Business of Life'. In this letter, which is too long to give *in extenso*, Mr. Trever states that Miss Morris has signed a five years contract to appear in the performances at the London Playhouse, that she is legally bound to that theatre, that she cannot appear anywhere else without the consent of himself and Miss Caroline Geean, who is backing the management, and that they confidently expect her to return as soon as she has recovered from the grief and exhaustion consequent upon her sad and unexpected loss."

Immediately below this note was the following :

"Since I wrote the above, and just before going to press, I have received this communication from Miss Morris, sent from Birchington-on-Sea where she is at present staying with her mother. 'As persistent efforts are being made to induce me to return to the London Playhouse I ask you kindly to announce in your columns that I have severed my connection with that theatre finally. At present I have no plans. But if I reappear in London it will certainly not be there'. Meanwhile there are rumours which I give for what they are worth that Mr. Constantine's clever play is likely to be withdrawn almost immediately."

So—the break had come at last ! Valentine had released herself from bondage ! Dale knew that at once, for he knew Valentine ; not completely, not with absolute intimacy, not perhaps as well as one other man, a priest in Birmingham,

knew her, but sufficiently to feel certain that she had done with Mark Trever, if not with Caroline Geean.

She had released herself! How extraordinary! How wonderful! Dale was still very weak. As he laid down the paper he was trembling.

He lay back in his long chair by the window which looked out on the sea. Now he had something to go back to. Now London would be different to him. Now perhaps he could write to Valentine.

He got up after two or three minutes. It was dreadful to feel so excited in mind and to be so feeble in body. He had had influenza before, and knew how low it can bring a man, and yet how rapid recovery can be once strength begins to come back. Probably in a very few days, a week at latest, he would be in excellent condition. But now his legs shook, he felt almost an old man, and terribly emotional. As he collapsed by the writing-table there were tears in his eyes.

What had happened in London after the death of Brian? What had happened to set the slave free? For Valentine was free. He knew that.

"As persistent efforts are being made to induce me to return to the London Playhouse I ask you kindly to announce in your columns that I have severed my connection with that theatre finally."

Those were words from the real Valentine, the woman who, when she was unknown and was struggling to get a position, had reduced Champion to angry silence in his own theatre. The hand of Trever was no longer upon her. She was breaking a contract. There would probably be legal proceedings. If there were she must surely lose the case, and would probably have to pay heavy damages. But she wouldn't go back to the London Playhouse, she wouldn't go back to Trever.

"I'll pay the damages!" Dale said to himself. "I don't care what they are. I'll pay them. I'll make her let me pay them."

And the ridiculous tears of influenza actually ran over his cheeks. But there was nobody there so it didn't matter. And he wrote his letter to Valentine, a terribly emotional letter, a letter full of influenza, perhaps, but full of heart too. And when he had finished it he went feebly to the French window, opened it and stepped out on to the big balcony beyond. The Adriatic was calm that day. He gazed over

the steel-coloured waters to Miramare on its point hanging over the sea. Evening wasn't far off. The sea, with its setting of land, looked dramatic to Dale. White in the pearly distance Miramare, seen in the vague, had become a dwelling for lovers, an ideal sea-shelter for romance, for hidden days with the woman one loved, for kisses exchanged by the wash of the sea murmuring at the foot of hanging gardens, for the telling of beautiful truths in the shadows of trees by the sea.

"The span of our earthly deeds is as a dream."

Then let the dream at least be beautiful, tender, and touched with the light of sincerity.

"Where is my cynicism?" Dale asked himself.

But at that moment there was nothing that jeered inside him, that looked on at his longing and laughed.

Nevertheless, very soon, he became aware that the little breeze which secretly ruffled the sea had the breath of winter still in it. And he went in and shut the window.

But now his room felt cold. He shuddered like one who had taken a sudden chill. All the exultation and excitement went out of him. A ghastly depression slid over him. He crept into bed and lay down.

And the pallor of evening faded quickly into the shadows of the night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MISS GEEAN'S big Limousine Hispano Suiza, painted grey and black, with thin lines of silver, and a tiny winged boy in silver on the radiator, slipped almost noiselessly over the white roads of the Island of Thanet. A smart young man in livery with a peaked cap sat in front by the smart chauffeur. Inside, wrapped up in white furs, with her white Pomeranian beside her, and a big bunch of mal-maisons tucked into the front of her coat, Miss Geean sat alone, looking out through the shut window at the bare landscape. A white fur rug lay over her knees, and had been carefully arranged round her feet by the smart young man.

She was warm and cosy on the padded cushions of the spacious car whose engine ran perfectly. But her round face looked hard, almost menacing, and in her half-closed grey eyes there was a weariness that suggested the approach of old age, not its actual presence perhaps, but rather the sound of its footsteps.

Her body was closely wrapped up in beautiful fabrics. But her face had the undressed look of an ageing and at the moment irritable woman, conscious of being entirely alone.

Presently she lifted the speaking-tube at her side from its narrow silver support and spoke through it to the chauffeur.

"The name of the house is 'Lamorva', Mrs. Morris's house, 'Lamorva'. It's one of a set of houses, in a private road right on the sea, called 'The Bungalows'. Directly we get into Birchington you'd better ask where they are."

The chauffeur touched his peaked cap, and sounded a soft chord as the car rounded a corner. The houses of Birchington came in sight and the grey tumbling sea.

"How can anyone live here in winter?" thought Miss Geean, looking out on the empty bare fields, on the empty, hard road, on the "white horses" leaping under the lash of the wind in the distance.

And she shivered under her furs, and thought of the Riviera, of Italy. But there was the theatre to attend to, a crisis to be faced. Receipts had dropped alarmingly at the London Playhouse, were diminishing day by day. Something very definite had to be done and done as quickly as possible.

A butcher's cart appeared a little way off down the road. Miss Geean again put her lips to the speaking-tube.

"Ask that man. He's a butcher. He's sure to know."

He did know, and in two or three minutes the Hispano turned in through the gateway protected by evergreens, and drew up at the back of a long grey bungalow stretching forward from the road to a cliff garden looking out to sea.

"Is this the house?" asked Miss Geean. "Lie down, Dixie!"

"It's got 'Peru' on the gate-post, ma'am."

"'Peru'! That's not the name. I'll get out. You're not to come Dixie! See that Dixie keeps quiet, Linn."

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Geean slipped down, keeping her hands in a wide, loose muff of white fur that looked like a bag.

"I'll find it."

"The Bungalows" stood in a row. But there were not many of them. Beyond "Peru" was "Arrivabene", beyond "Arrivabene", "Mon Repos".

"Of course!" said Miss Geean to herself, looking at "Mon Repos".

What a marvellous car that was standing before the bungalow on the other side of "Mon Repos"! A Rolls-Royce with a wonderful long and low body, one of the latest models evidently. Miss Geean looked at it with the appraising eyes of one who always knew a good thing, when she saw it. There was no chauffeur in the driving-seat. The car stood alone.

"'Lamorva'!"

Miss Geean's usually smooth white forehead puckered in a frown. But perhaps it was Valentine's car, a wild new purchase of hers. If not there was someone calling upon her.

"It's someone from London, from the theatres!"

Suddenly Miss Geean knew that.

"Someone's come down to try and get hold of her, after seeing that note about her leaving us in the *Daily Telegraph*. That's what it is!"

And as she pushed the electric bell of "Lamorva" she stared at the yellow car.

In a moment a maid came.

"Can I see Miss Morris?"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, but Miss Morris is engaged. She's not seeing anyone to-day."

"Except—*him*!" thought Miss Geean. "Exactly!"

"I'm a very intimate friend of Miss Morris. I've come all the way from London to see her. I'm sure she won't send me away. Just give her this card. Wait! I'll write on it."

She drew out from some hidden place a tiny gold pencil with a sapphire at the top and wrote on her card:

"Valentine, dear, you can't send *me* away. I've come all the way from London. I won't keep you long. But I'm cold. Do give me a cup of tea. I'm going on for the night to Lord Kemton's house at Broadstairs. Carrie."

"Please give that to Miss Morris."

"Very well, ma'am."

The maid went away, and Miss Geean waited in the midst of a silence which seemed to her cold and dreary. The maid was gone for a long time. (Or Miss Geean thought it was a long time.) At last she came back, from behind a thick green curtain which shut off the interior of the bungalow from the front door.

"Please to come, ma'am. But Miss Morris is very sorry indeed that she can only see you for a few minutes, as she's very particularly engaged to-day."

"A warning flag hung out for me!" Miss Geean thought, grimly, as she walked into the house. "Valentine doesn't quite know me yet."

"Please to come this way, ma'am."

The maid went past a door which Miss Geean felt "in her bones" was the door of the drawing-room, and showed the visitor into a little green room lined with books, looking out not to the cliff garden at the front of the house, but to a small shrubbery at the side, which divided 'Lamorva' from the next door bungalow.

"I'll tell Miss Morris, ma'am."

"Thank you."

The maid went away, and Miss Geean stood at the window with her hands in the big white muff. Evergreen shrubs, grey sky, grey tumbling sea, silence, dead-season silence of winter in a summer place! What did anyone do here? What did Valentine do here alone with her old mother? But there was that yellow car waiting outside. The tentacles of the other life were stretching out to this dead-season place, to this woman who had fled from her triumphs. Why? Exactly why? Miss Geean hadn't been able to force the answer to that question out of Mark Trever. She must force it now out of Valentine. And she must bring her back to the London Playhouse. The receipts were falling down to almost nothing. Money was going out instead of coming in. Trever couldn't fill the house. Miss Carrington was an actress of no account. Valentine had got to come back, and as quickly as possible. Hearing a door click behind her Miss Geean turned round and saw Valentine coming into the room.

"Valentine darling!"

She went up to Valentine but not impetuously—very quietly, took her hand and leaned forward and upward to kiss her. And after a brief instant of—surely—hesitation Valentine allowed the kiss to happen.

"I know you're engaged. But I've come all the way from London. I had to see you. It's so important."

"Why—important?"

"How can you ask that, after all that has happened between us?"

"Sit down, Carrie. Sit here by the fire. Tea is coming."

"I was so cold. Here?"

"Yes."

"It's so quiet here. Not a sound. What do you do all day?"

"Walk—think—remember—wonder why."

"And read. All these books!"

"I've scarcely read at all."

"You can't stay here."

"Why not?"

"Valentine dear, I've always considered you a most honourable woman."

"Honourable?"

"Yes, a woman of your word, a staunch, loyal woman, a woman one could trust."

"Have you?"

"Yes—a fine creature."

"Really?"

"You're not going to prove to me that I am a fool, a woman of no discernment, no judgment?"

"Are you here to talk morality to me?"

"There may be morality even in business."

"Then you have come to talk business? Oh, here is the tea. Put it here, Marsh."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Which is it to be, Carrie, morality or business? Do help yourself to everything."

"You must come back to London," said Miss Geean, with great gentleness, but also with great decision.

"Perhaps I shall, presently."

"No—now."

"If I did how would it matter to you?"

"How? The theatre——"

"Carrie, I shall never—never—go inside of the London Playhouse again."

"You have signed a contract with me for five years. It has only run a few months."

" Yes, I know, and I am sorry. I don't like to break my word. But I must do it."

" Why ? "

" If you don't know why I can't tell you. I can never tell you."

" Is it on account of Miss Carrington ? Because if it is——"

" Miss Carrington ! "

Valentine's pale face, which till now had been stamped with a curious rigidity, changed. Her eyes flashed with apparently irresistible irony. An expression that seemed mingled of bitterness and pity combined altered her pale lips.

" Did he——" she began.

But she stopped short and said, after a pause,

" Very well ! If you think that let us agree together that it is only because of Miss Carrington. Yes, yes ! " Valentine added, as if speaking to, and for, herself. " Miss Carrington of course ! It is always—Miss Carrington who makes us change our lives, isn't it ? Or it is always thought to be. And it's better not to disturb these instinctive impressions, much better not."

But there was an expression of wonder, contradicting her words, on her face as she sat looking at Miss Geean, of a wonder almost brooding, with depths in it, surely unfathomable depths.

" Valentine," Miss Geean said, after an uneasy pause. " I don't understand you."

" No ; perhaps not."

" What happened between you and Mark on the night you left the theatre ? "

" But he has told you ! "

" But I want to hear *your* version."

" Mine ? I have no version ! Believe what he told you."

" But I don't believe it."

" Surely a leading actor is incapable of lying to a woman ! "

" Valentine," said Miss Geean, with a sudden inflexibility of voice and manner. " I wish I could get you to realise that this is a very serious matter."

" For me ? I daresay it is, or will be."

" And for *me* ! I have put my money into the London Playhouse, taken a lease of five years, because I had your promise to stay with me there, your promise embodied in a contract."

Valentine's face changed again. The irony died out of it. The wonder had gone before.

"I'm sorry," she said, with simplicity. "I'm very sorry. I never thought I should break my word to you."

"Don't break it."

"Carrie, there are things one can't do. I can never go back to that theatre."

"But what is the mystery? You have had a disagreement, a quarrel even, with Mark Trever. That's obvious. But——"

"Not a disagreement! Not a quarrel! Don't use such poor, petty words."

"Then what has happened?"

"Carrie, everything has happened."

"Everything?"

"The irreparable has happened. Doesn't that include everything?"

"I don't know what you mean. I am really not a fool, Valentine, but we seem to be speaking different languages to-day. You are up in the clouds, and I'm not. And as I've no intention, or capacity, perhaps, to fly up you really must come down to me. You and Mark Trever have had some very serious misunderstanding. That's evident. But why should I be the victim of it?"

"I don't want you to be. Find another actress who draws money and forget me."

"Forget you? Aren't we still friends?"

"Are we? Carrie, tell me! What is your intention?"

"My intention?"

"What do you intend to do when you find that I *cannot* come back to that theatre?"

"But you will come back. You are coming back. I know how it is, Valentine. You have had a great shock. You are not yourself and——"

"It is because I am myself that I shall never go back to your theatre, Carrie. I could only go back there if I ceased to be myself."

"Do you quite realise the money side of this matter?" said Miss Geean, after a silence.

"I haven't thought much about that, but of course I shall be a heavy loser."

"And that doesn't trouble you?"

"Money is really so unimportant in comparison with the things of the——"

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She glanced at Miss Geean and checked herself. Then she added :

" With the fragile, delicate things which can be so easily injured or ruined."

" You find money unimportant ! You haven't saved much, have you ? "

" I don't want to talk about money."

" You may not want to talk about it but if you don't carry out your contract with me you'll certainly have to think about it."

" Why ? "

" Because you'll find yourself in financial difficulties—I should think."

" I'll manage somehow."

" But I am a heavy loser by what you are doing. Do you realise that ? Since you left the theatre the receipts have fallen continuously ; unless you come back at once we shall be obliged to take the play off."

" It's a vile play. I have always hated it. But I am sorry you are losing your money."

" You don't seem very sorry."

" I am sorry. But you are so rich, Carrie. And I put so many things before money."

" I may be rich, but that's no reason why I should want to lose money. If you don't come back, and at once, Valentine, you will be a robber."

" A robber ! "

" Yes. Already you are robbing me of my money. I lost several hundreds last week on the play. If you refuse to come back you will rob me of thousands of pounds. The play was safe for a year if you stayed in it. I was making a steady profit of five hundred pounds a week, and now——"

" I *can't* talk about money ! " said Valentine, desperately, getting up.

" You are always very willing to spend it. You deny yourself nothing. Your house in London, this house here, that marvellous new car of yours——"

" What car ? "

" The one standing at the gate."

" That isn't mine."

" Oh, I supposed that it was."

Miss Geean waited. Valentine said nothing. She was

standing by the fire with one foot on the fender, looking sad, haggard, supremely detached.

"Anyhow," Miss Geean continued, in a harsher voice. "Whatever you want you always manage to get. Look at the pictures you have bought, the china, the——"

"Please, Carrie, don't talk of all that. You don't understand me. It's true that when I have money I spend it too fast. But I have endured poverty and if necessary I could endure it again. I'm not one of those who *refuse* to be poor."

"Well, I am!" said Miss Geean, with biting emphasis. "I have been poor, too. But I am not going to allow myself to be made poor again. No thank you! You must fulfil your contract. You must come back to the theatre."

Her face had set into grimness now. Looking at it Valentine remembered Dale's startling assertion that Carrie was old. And suddenly she knew that Dale was right. The woman sitting there by the fire with those firmly set lips, slightly drawn down at the corners, and those cold grey eyes, was old; not yet very old, but no longer at all young. And the strange thing was that her age was for the first time revealed to Valentine by the light of a ruling passion. The dusty corners, the worm-eaten boards, the broken windows, the peeling woodwork in that House of Life were illuminated suddenly by the glare of the lamp of avarice.

"I cannot allow you to ruin me for a mere caprice, Valentine. I am fond of you. I admire you. I have done my very best to help you on in your career."

"Oh, no!"

"You deny that! When I took one of the finest theatres in London merely——"

"Carrie, let us stick to the truth if we are to speak of this matter. You took the London Playhouse to make money out of me—oh, quite legitimately! I'm not blaming you. You are a business woman, and a very clever one. Why shouldn't you use your business talent to make money out of me? But you didn't take the theatre for me. You took it for yourself. If you had cared in the least for my career you would never have insisted—or got Mr. Trever to insist—on my appearing in that vile play of Constantine's."

"I deny that it's vile."

"Oh, Carrie! You who once said to Martin Dale and me that you hated the screech in art."

"We must give the public what it wants if——"

"I know! If we are to make money. Well, it seems the public wants offal. But I've done with offal. I've done—done—done with it! I'm free of it, free at last!"

"I have no idea what you mean about offal. But you are not free. You are bound to me and I shall hold you to your contract. Now—sit down again, please, Valentine."

"Very well!"

She sat down, still with that strange air of detachment. Miss Geean stretched out a soft but imperative hand and took hold of her wrist. "I want to prove to you how much I value you, Valentine. I want to prove my friendship to you."

"But——"

"Listen to me! You say you are ready to be poor again, and perhaps you really think you are. But I know you aren't. Don't deceive yourself. Your tastes are all luxurious. You love comfort. You love beautiful things. You hate to have to deny yourself anything. You are a true artist, and the true artist is exuberant, can't sit counting pennies and saying, 'I mustn't spend that! I mustn't spend that!' Even now you have debts. I know it. Never mind how—but I know it. You can't afford to break with me, and anyhow I'm not going to allow you to break with me. But as you and Trever have come to loggerheads, and you won't give in, I'm ready to show my friendship for you in a way you can't mistake."

"Yes? How?" Valentine asked, vaguely almost.

"By eliminating Trever."

The vagueness went out of Valentine's face and manner.

"By eliminating—I don't understand. What do you mean? How can you eliminate Mark Trever?"

"If you'll come back I'll undertake that Trever shall leave the theatre. I'll get him out of it."

"Oh, no!"

"But I will."

"But you've got a contract with him."

"Certainly I have."

"Then——"

"Aren't you breaking a contract?"

"Not for a material reason! I have—I have a reason——"

"That you could explain in a court of Law?"

Valentine tried to take her hand away from the soft, but

tenacious grip of Miss Geean's white fingers, but Miss Geean wouldn't let go.

"Valentine, I mean to carry this thing through one way or the other. I'm accustomed to succeed in what I undertake. Whatever happens you are going to cost me money, a lot of money. But I would rather pay and keep you than pay and lose you. If you'll come back within—let us say—ten days from now, I'll bribe Mark Trever to go out of the theatre. But in return you must sign a new contract with me. That's only fair, since I shall be making a great sacrifice."

"It's a sacrifice I shall never allow you to make!" said Valentine, releasing her hand with force. "I will never profit at Mark Trever's expense."

"I tell you I'll bribe him. He'll do anything for money—like other people. You are worth far more to me than he is. I always suspected it, was practically sure of it. But now it's proved to me. I *know* it. Trever thought he was the draw in the theatre, but he isn't. *You* are the draw, and I'm going to stick to you. Leave it all to me. I'm not afraid of Trever. I know how to deal with that type of man. When it comes to business I can always find a way out. But I made a false step on the night wher you quarrelled with him."

"Please—Carrie—I didn't quarrel with him. Don't use that poor, vulgar word."

"Well, anyhow, that night. He didn't wish you to play. I did. I told him your playing *that* night would be a marvellous advertisement for the theatre. He said we didn't need an advertisement, and that the public would be shocked, and a lot of nonsense. And I was fool enough to leave the matter in his hands. Of course my instinct was right. But it always is right in matters of business. You can trust yourself to me."

"No! No! No!"

Valentine got up again.

"No! I can't! I won't!"

"What's the matter? Why are you crying out?"

"Did I?" Valentine almost whispered, as if frightened.

"What is it?" said Miss Geean, getting up too.

"What is it? I can never explain, because if I did you couldn't understand."

"Perhaps you underrate my intelligence."

"It isn't a question of intelligence. It's a question of

—don't let us talk about it. No—no! Carrie I can't go back to you. Even if Mark Trever were not there I couldn't go back to you. Not now. Not after to day!"

"Why? What has happened to-day? I've offered you the theatre on a velvet cushion. What more d'you want?"

"I want nothing from you, Carrie, nothing more. You have always been very kind and good to me. You believed in me when scarcely anyone else did."

"When *no one* else did!"

"That's not true. Martin Dale believed in me."

"Psh!" said Miss Geean, with a pale sneer. "He believed in you for a particular part. I saw your lasting value as a public performer. I was willing to bank on you. I have banked on you and now I can't allow a silly quarrel between you and Trever to——"

"Carrie, please stop!"

Miss Geean stood looking at Valentine in silence with hard obstinate eyes.

"I've had no quarrel, as you will call it, with Mark Trever. I shall never be his enemy. I wouldn't do him any harm for the world. What has happened between us wasn't a quarrel. A quarrel can be made up—as they call it. What has happened between us can never be made up. We are divided for ever by a gulf—a gulf of feeling, I suppose it is. And we can never cross it either of us to go to the other. Carrie, I came back to the theatre that night to act, after saying I couldn't, because I felt that if I didn't do something, force myself to do something, to work, I should break down utterly, perhaps go mad. The reason was that I only found out how I loved Brian after he was dead. I didn't know before. Sometimes I was cold to him. Sometimes I didn't think I loved him very much. I was critical of him. I played the detective to him. I—I wasn't like a mother ought to be. I can't tell you why that was. But there was a reason. But love should override reasons, and mine didn't. But when Brian died I knew that I did love him, had always loved him. And I was desperate. And so, for fear of myself, I came to my work. And he—Mark Trever—thought, and will always think, that I came because I was jealous of him, jealous of him with Miss Carrington, and jealous of him with the public. I didn't explain him, because I knew he hadn't the power to understand. And I thought that you—but perhaps you can! Do you understand? Do you understand

why I must break away, why I *can't* go on acting with Mark Trever?"

"I don't know that I do. I'm very sorry for you, Valentine. A loss such as you have had must be dreadful. But you know how actors are. You shouldn't be too hard on him. I'm sure he——"

"I must be away, always away, from him."

"Very well. Then, as I said, I'll get rid of him and you shall act in the play with another man."

"Carrie, I can't come back to you. I never will, never."

"You must, you shall."

"No."

Miss Geean looked into Valentine's eyes for a moment. Then she said:

"What about my money? How do you mean to compensate me?"

A strange blank look altered Valentine's face.

"What can I do? What do you want me to do?"

"What I *want* you to do is to be reasonable and come back to the theatre."

"No."

"Then you ought to compensate me. Over this play of Constantine's I shall probably lose at least sixteen thousand pounds at the lowest computation."

"Sixteen thousand pounds!"

"Yes. My average make so far is at least two thousand a month when you and Trever have had your shares. There was no reason whatever why the play shouldn't have run another eight months at least. Probably it would have gone for a year. But reckoning eight months only I should have stood to make about sixteen thousand pounds. Then there's the rest of my lease of the theatre. I've got it for five years as you know. Without you I should have to get rid of it. Mark Trever's no earthly good to me except in combination with you."

"You want more than sixteen thousand pounds from me."

"I don't want anything from you if you'll come back."

"No—no."

"Very well. Then I ought to have sixteen thousand pounds compensation. I won't ask anything for losing you after the run of Constantine's play would in the natural course of things be over. In that I'm treating you generously."

"Yes, yes."

There was still that blank look on Valentine's face. Almost she looked stupid at that moment.

"Sixteen thousand pounds," she said after a moment, in a dull voice.

"Well, if you aren't satisfied with my reckoning you can see the books and reckon it out for yourself. I'm not trying to cheat you."

"Oh, no—no! Of course not. I didn't mean—I'm not clever about money."

Miss Geean made no comment on this. She stood like one waiting for a decision, calm, steady, immovably obstinate; but as Valentine didn't speak again at last she said:

"You hadn't thought out the money side of this question, had you?"

"No; I hadn't."

"I knew you hadn't. I knew if you had you would never have behaved in this way, have left me in the lurch like this. You hadn't realised what my loss would be if you left me."

"I can't come back. Indeed I can't."

There was a sound of desperation in Valentine's voice.

"Whatever nappens I can't come back."

Miss Geean seemed to hesitate. She looked grim, almost menacing. Then some process of thought evidently obtained in her, and her face changed, looked more as it usually did.

"You've been through the mill, haven't you?" she said. "Right through the mill?"

"The mill?"

"Don't you know the expression?"

"Oh, yes—yes."

"You've been a provincial actress. You ought to know it."

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I've been through the mill, too, in a different way, in America. I don't talk about it over here. It's a long time ago. But I haven't forgotten it. I was a poor child, in New York. I wasn't quite a child of the streets, but I very nearly was. Squalor was my portion."

She stroked the big muff gently with a useless-looking hand.

"I got out of it by my own determination, my own will power. My efforts were not prompted from the outside. I did it all; willed it, did it. D'you care to know how?"

"Yes."

"I made a very old man, *very* old, and very, very rich, enormously rich, love me; not in a paternal way. you understand. I lived with him for five years. When he died he left me everything he had. There was no reason why he shouldn't. Since then I have added to my fortune. There you have my history in a nutshell. It isn't particularly interesting. Perhaps you wonder why I should bother to tell it to you."

"Why?"

"Because I do really like you. There's something in you I like. And I want to warn you."

"Warn me?"

"Yes, not to cherish high-flown, wild ideas about life. You said just now that you were not one of those who *refuse* to be poor, and I told you I was one of those. A poverty-stricken life isn't a life at all. I have been poverty-stricken. You can take it from me. But you must know it from your own experience."

"Don't be angry when I tell you, though you have genius as an actress, in some ways you are a fool. About money I consider you a fool. You're a spendthrift. You don't know the value of money, what a precious thing, what a life-giver it is. You talk as if it were nothing, not to be seriously considered. If you stick to me I'll make your fortune and add to my own. If you leave me what's going to happen to you? You'll lose your salary, your share of your profits in the theatre, and if you're honest you'll have to pay me sixteen thousand pounds. If you're not honest you can refuse to pay me. Then of course I shall be obliged to sue you for compensation. What the law will give me I don't know. Not sixteen thousand pounds, I daresay. Still I shall get considerable damages, I'm sure. And the costs will fall on you. Either way, as far as I can see, you'll be practically ruined. And all for a question of *feeling*."

"I think questions of feeling are the greatest questions in the world, the only real questions, perhaps."

"What nonsense! I gave my youth to a very old man. Do you think I have regretted it? Never! Not for a moment! I saw clearly into life. You don't yet. Clever people like us ought not to consent to be poor, because they can't be happy poor—not worth-while people. Poverty's a strait-waistcoat. We can't wear it. You've tasted luxury. You've tasted ease. You've eaten of the fruit of Beauty. You can't

give them up. But even you can't shoulder a load of debt, such as you'll certainly have to shoulder unless you come back to me, without sinking under it."

"I can't come back. I can never come back."

"Very well. Now I must go."

"I'll compensate you. Somehow I'll manage it. I'll compensate you."

"I leave it to you."

Miss Geean held out her hand and Valentine had to put hers into it.

"You're being terribly foolish," she said.

"I can't help it. I can't help it."

When Miss Geean was out in the cold sea wind she looked again at the marvellous yellow car which was still standing at the back of the bungalow.

Was Valentine being terribly foolish after all?

Perhaps there was a man in the drawing-room with the shut door who was willing to make her safe from poverty, who was willing to pay Miss Geean her sixteen thousand pounds compensation.

But was Valentine like that?

"Kingsford Hall, Broadstairs," Miss Geean said, getting into her car. "Hello, Dixie!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

CHAMPION sat by the fire in the drawing-room of "Larmorva" with a copy of the *Era* in his hand. The paper was open, and he looked at it now and then, but though he kept it in his hand he scarcely read more than a sentence or two here and there. He was obviously impatient. From time to time he looked at his watch, and once he explained audibly, "Damn the woman!" At last, as the time seemed long and nobody came, he got up, dropping the paper on the carpet near the fire, thrust his hands into the pockets of his wide trousers, and walked to the french window. This opened on to a paved pathway.

Beyond there was a grass bank with steps cut out in it descending to a smooth lawn which stretched to the edge of the cliff. Beyond the cliff, which was a sheer drop to the sandy and deserted beach, the sullen and cold-looking brown sea tossed its white crested waves to the horizon. On either side of the paved path sturdy shrubs shook in the winter wind. The lawn was edged by two narrow paths, flanked by narrow hedges backed by low walls. These divided Valentine Morris's property from the bungalows on the left and right hand. At the end of her lawn there was a flag-staff. But no flag fluttered from it.

Still keeping his hands deep in his trousers pockets Champion stared out at this small winter scene by the sea. In the grey light of the sunless day his large face, covered with the handwriting of hard living and dissipation, showed a dingy yellowish grey. There was something monumental about it, and his big frame looked unsuitably large and overpowering in the small drawing-room of the bungalow, which was obviously a woman's room, bright, cosy, but simple, designed apparently to be the living-room of a holiday house.

Champion turned round slowly, stared at the door, seemed to listen, then muttered, "Damn the woman!" again and turned once more to the window. He stretched out a hand, lifted a handle of the french window, opened it and stepped out on to the flagstones.

The vitality of the wind made his yellow grey face tingle; the freshness of it played round the puckers and pouches of his eyes. He drew in the air through his distended nostrils, lifting his big chest, then exhaled, then inhaled again.

The healthiness in this deserted place, silent and cold by the sea, startled him, affected him not only physically but morally. Suddenly he felt within him a sort of heavy longing for a life quite different from the life he had led, the business life, the theatre life, always intent on making money, on getting there. He realised his age, that the better part of life was over for him, that in spite of his bodily strength, which was still great though he had done much to dissipate it, he must soon be old. The sea wind seemed to tell him his age, to point out to him what was to come, the inevitable descent.

Women! All through his life, as he thought back, women and money had been the two things, the two holdings in the hands of Life, which he had struggled after. Always he had

been after women and money. And he had been successful in his obstinate endeavour to possess many women and much money. He had had his refusals and his losses, of course. But he couldn't, looking back on his life, say that he had been unsuccessful. Even now he was fresh from a financial triumph. A big speculation in oil shares which he had gone in for "bald-headed" had turned out even better than he had hoped. He had just got out with a very large profit. So large had been the profit that he had been able to stop his wife's mouth—so he put it to himself—with a string of black pearls without missing the money he had paid for it. The Central Theatre wasn't doing too well, certainly, but that seemed scarcely to matter at the moment. And the luck would change—when he had hiked Maud Eden out of the place. She was the devil in the theatre, and now the public seemed tired of her, as he was. He would hike her out and get someone else in!

Yes, he would get someone else in.

Already his mind had got away from death and was back among women. What a hold a long passion gets over a man! But he felt strange to-day, and, in spite of the determination that was in him, and which he knew to be powerful and fierce, he felt full of foreboding. It was this silent place, this emptiness, this sound of the sea in his ears, this feel of the wintry wind about his face, this definite intrusion of nature into his usually artificial life, which was playing the devil with him. He shook his big shoulders.

"Will that damned woman never go?"

Just then he heard a soft, melodious chord somewhere behind him, and near.

"Ah!"

He swung round on the flags with a heavy, but active, movement, and saw Valentine coming into the room with the open window. He thought she looked oddly white and expressive. Perhaps it was the effect of the dull light. And then her short copper-coloured hair! That had altered her, and he wasn't quite accustomed to it yet.

"Aren't you cold out there?" she asked him, coming to the window.

"Well, if I stayed out I'd need an overcoat. She's gone?"

"Yes."

"My God! I thought you'd never get rid of her."

His eyes went over her face trying to read her.

"Settled it?"

"Yes."

"You're—you're not going back to her?"

"No, I'm not going back."

She put her long hands to her dyed hair and moved her head.

"You couldn't let me have a whisky and soda, could you?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm very sorry——"

"It doesn't matter."

"There's none in the house. I ought to have——"

"Rubbish! Much better for me not to have it."

He made a movement to join her in the room. When he did that she said:

"No, let me come out."

"You'll catch cold."

"I'll get a coat. And I'll get yours. Let's have a walk. There's a stairway cut in the cliff. Let's go down to the beach. Oh—I must be out. D'you mind?"

"Of course not!"

"Stay here!"

She went away quickly. He watched her enticing, angular figure, very thin, disappear through the doorway. He set his big lips together.

"What's it? She's nothing much of a figure really, but there's something—she's got it! She's got genius! She's different from all the rest. I could work her into a success that'd set the world talking, give me the chance. She's got it. And the rest of 'em haven't!"

His way of estimating the mystery which can never be really estimated.

"She's an artist. They've nearly done for her between 'em but I'll nurse her back into the real thing. I'll nurse her back!"

And something deep in him glowed, something of which he had no need to be, even secretly, ashamed.

"Give me the chance—give me the chance."

He saw her coming back, her head still uncovered, wearing a long astrakhan coat, and carrying his big fur-lined coat over her arm.

"Here! Put it on! I'll help you. Here's your cap."

She had had it in her hand under the coat. He let her help him.

"I don't wear a hat here," she said. "I like the wind in my hair. It seems to help me."

"Ah! and you want helping. That's surr!"

As they went down the garden he looked at her out of the tail of his eye. The detachment, the intense preoccupation, he detected in her affected him powerfully. He felt that she was just conscious that he was there with her, but that her mind was working, desperately perhaps, on something which she thought was wholly her concern, not at all his.

"Where's the steps?"

"You'll see in a minute. Follow me."

She went over the cliff edge, suddenly turning to the left.

The wind lifted her thick hair. The dyed ends stood up, shook, divided in violent disorder. She sank away from the garden. He followed her.

"By Jove, this is cunning!" he said. "One'd never suspect it was here."

She didn't answer. Lightly, swiftly, she was going down the steep steps. Her movement made him feel awkward and heavy, and aware of his age. He plunged down firmly after her.

"There!" she said.

All houses were hidden from them. They stood under the shadow of the cliff alone with the sand and the sea. It was as if nature, brusque and naked, suddenly seized them in cold and almost violent arms.

"I come here every day," she said, "when the tide's down."

"D'you come with your mother?"

"No; alone. Mother says it's too sad here. When she goes out she walks on the top. She'd made Brian her life. She cares for nothing now."

"Well she's got you."

"I'm too different from her to be of much use to her. Of course she's fond of me. But I believe she's afraid of me. I don't want her to be. I hate her to be. But I believe she is. I can't help having a brain quite different from hers. But it frightens her."

"I think you had a try to frighten me when you came to the Central," said Champion, pulling his motor-cap a little lower down over his eyes. "God! this is some air and no mistake. Where are we making for?"

"Let's walk towards the sea."

"Right! Want an arm?"

"No, thank you."

They set out over the sand with the wind in their faces. Valentine's copper-coloured hair stood up on end, exposing her white forehead.

"I say," said Champion bluntly. "Whatever did you dye your hair for?"

"I don't know. Why have I danced night after night in hot little beastly night clubs full of fools thinking they are living? Why have I wasted my money and run up debts for things I didn't really want and that have done me no good? Why have I taken my talent down into the sewers and played the charlatan instead of aiming at the stars even if I only reached the tree tops? Why was I a bad mother?"

"That you weren't, I'll bet my last shilling."

"You don't know! A man can't ever know about such things. A child needs—oh, I didn't give mine what he needed! I didn't. I didn't. And now I never can."

There was desperation in her voice. She pointed towards the tumbling brown waters.

"I feel as if he'd gone far out over the sea where I can never follow him," she said. "When I look at the sea I find myself searching for him. Isn't it ridiculous?"

They walked on for a moment in silence over the sand. Then she said:

"I can't begin again with Brian. But I'm going to begin again without him."

Champion lifted a big hand and gently pressed her arm for a moment.

"Now you're talking. You've been right off the track. You've got to get back. To be square with you, I was ashamed of you that first night at the Playhouse. You were a terror in the Central, but you were an artist and I forgave you. But at the Playhouse you were a racehorse that had allowed itself to be harnessed to a donkey-cart. You hadn't the spunk to kick the damned thing to matchwood, and I was ashamed of you. But now you'll start again."

She turned her head, and her hair blew over sideways, as she gave him a long, strange look which he didn't understand.

"Yes. But how?"

"You'll start with me. Now you've got rid of old Carrie

you've got to come back to me. By the way, Carrie's a stiff proposition. I don't see how you shunted her."

Valentine stood still.

"Oh, I'd forgotten!"

"What'd you forgotten?"

"Since Brian—I believe my brain's had a shake. I forget things in a moment. How am I going to begin again? There's something I've got to do first, and I don't see how I can ever do it. But I must do it. If I don't I'm a robber."

"Whatever are you talking about?" said Champion, with his characteristic roughness.

"I was bound to Carrie for five years."

"Well, but you've got out of it. You just said so."

"But I didn't say how."

"What d'you mean? She's standing out for something?"

The hard look of the ruthless financier had suddenly altered his big face.

"If I'd been bound to *you* for five years would you have let me go?"

"Not me! Not by a long way!"

"She says Constantine's play's gone to nothing. They'll have to take it off. She's losing money."

Champion's lips twisted in a grim smile.

"Carrie Geean losing money! Wish I'd seen her mug to-day!"

Valentine walked on slowly and he kept beside her.

"And you tell me she's satisfied to lose you on top of her money? Well then I know nothing about Carrie Geean."

"Carrie is within her rights," said Valentine, in a low voice that was almost lost in the wind. "She's within her rights."

"What's that?" said Champion sharply.

"Naturally she wants compensation!"

"Aha!" exclaimed Champion.

And he stopped in his turn.

"Now we're getting to it! Now we're on to old Carrie!"

"Why d'you call her old?"

"Because she is old. She's been going ever since I can remember. She ain't far off sixty."

"I never thought——"

"She's as clever as the devil. And look at her health! Why, she's made of stone, heart and all. And stone don't suffer from disease as far as I know. So Carrie wants compensation! What's she want?"

Valentine looked at the sea. There was something like despair in her eyes.

"What a crazy creature I am!" she thought. "I said I'd compensate her. What did I mean? I can't. How can I? And I said I would—just on impulse. I'm mad!"

And the roaring of the sea came to her, and she saw Brian die, and she saw Trevor's eyes when he was telling her that she had determined to act, while Brian lay unburied, because she was afraid of Trevor's getting all the applause, and for a moment she felt the world into which she had been born as a monster to be escaped from. But Carrie had to be compensated first.

"What's she want?" Champion repeated.

"Sixteen thousand pounds."

"Sixteen—hell!"

And then suddenly he began to laugh.

"Sixteen thousand? That's the best I've heard since I was foaled! Sixteen thousand, and pounds if you please, not—it must have been dollars! Carrie's American. She reckons in dollars. She's asking you for dollars."

"No. She was making five hundred pounds a week with the play, and it seemed certain to run another eight months at least. So—you see! Oh, why are we talking about money out here?"

"Want to go indoors?"

"No, no! But it's awful to be talking like this by the sea, isn't it? It's grotesque. But sometimes everything seems grotesque to me now. And I seem grotesque in it."

He took her by the arm.

"Come on, now! Let's walk!"

"Yes."

She felt supported. His strong touch had meaning in it, a lift in it that she was acutely conscious of. She had often thought Champion a brute. She had often been disgusted by his coarseness and brutality. But she had never felt him to be weak. Now she felt that he was strong.

"What did you say to old Carrie when she opened her mouth at you?"

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"I said I'd compensate her, that somehow I'd manage to compensate her."

"Not to the tune of sixteen thousand pounds!"

"She must have thought I meant that."

"Christ!"

With a violent movement Valentine disengaged herself from his hand.

"If you ever say that again——"

"What's the matter?"

"It's horrible—hideous—to use that name, to bring in *that* name when we're talking about——"

She broke off.

He saw tears, surely of anger, in her eyes.

"I can't bear that sort of thing. I won't bear it from anybody."

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Morris. It's all right. I'll never do it again. I didn't mean anything. It's nothing but habit, a damned stupid habit."

"You see I'm—well, I'm a Catholic. And I feel certain things very deeply. To me they mean——" she stopped.

"I say I'm sorry, and I am sorry. Please look over it."

"Yes, yes. Don't think I'm pretending to be good. It isn't that. But I'm a believer in my religion. And I can't bear it to be mixed up with vile, sordid things."

"I respect you for it. Now we're all right, aren't we?"

They walked on in silence till they were at the edge of the sea. Line after line of surf made towards them, hurrying, eager, cold. And in each line of surf was a voice which Valentine heard with a sense of awe and an undersense of departure.

"Now look here! Let's get back to Carrie Gear."

She looked at him with startled eyes.

"You can't give her sixteen thousand pounds. *First place*, you haven't got it as far as I know."

"No. How could I have it?"

"Exactly! How could you? *Second place*, if you had it you wouldn't hand it to her."

"Yes, I would."

"Once I thought you were a business woman. You were pretty cute with me. Seems you've lost it. *Anyway* you haven't got the money, so old Carrie can't get it *from* you. That's certain. So what's she going to do?"

"She says she will have to sue me for compensation if I don't give it to her."

"Does she? Then let her sue you. She'll get something, of course. But she won't get within a few miles of what she's asking you."

"I can't let her sue me."

"Why not?"

"Because I can explain why I left her. I've broken a contract and I can't explain why—never—not to anybody."

"Then let her go ahead and get what she can. Don't defend it. There'll be a lot of talk, of course, but all the better for you."

"The better!"

"It'll send the public to see you—at the Central in Dale's new play."

"Oh—sometimes I *hate* the theatre!" she exclaimed, with violence.

"Why ever?"

"I want to be looked at, if I must be looked at, because I'm doing something, something interesting, or wonderful, or strange, or beautiful, doing it as only I can do it. But I hate to be looked at, to have people come to stare at me, because my little boy is dead, or because I've been sued in a law court for breaking a contract. I hate it so that I would rather go away and hide myself and never be seen by anyone again. That's why I'm here now, because there's nobody to stare at me and say, 'That's Valentine Morris, the actress! You know, the one who's just lost her illegitimate child from meningitis!' Ah, how beastly the world is! And if you're an actress, whatever happens to you, however horrible it is, the cry always goes up, 'what a splendid advertisement for her!' And even you say it. Being connected with the theatre does people harm. Oh, it does! It vulgarises them. It makes them inhuman—no, it makes them disgustingly human. That's what it does! It makes them so human that in the end they're revolting."

"I say, Miss Morris, don't foul your own nest!"

"I don't. It's the nest that will foul me if I stay in it."

"You don't mean—you don't tell me you're thinking of——"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, with a sudden change of manner.

She looked away at the lines of surf. To her they seemed

alive, purposeful, each one hurrying after the line in front of it, each one holding a murmuring voice. Yet each one died, faded in a thin, almost imperceptible film of water, ceased when its hour was come. A film of water, a stain on the sand—the end! Eager movement, a voice full of life and mystery, then suddenly nothingness, silence. But other lines of surf were coming up behind. The vanished were instantly replaced.

"For none may tarry in the land of Egypt."

Those words muttered in her brain as she looked at the sea.

She turned to Champion.

"If I did give up the stage it wouldn't matter," she said.

"I should be forgotten in a month. I've only had one success worth speaking of, the one I had in your theatre. *One* success! I should hardly be remembered even for a month."

"I'll make it so that you'll be remembered in the history of the English stage if you'll only put yourself in my hands," he said, strongly.

"But I've got to compensate Carrie first. And how can I ever do that?"

"You'll have to let her sue you."

"No, I can't. I should be too ashamed. To have the whole world know I had broken my word, that I'm not a woman of my word, to be made to explain why."

"Why did you break it?" he asked roughly.

"Because I *had* to! There are people I *can't* be with. I would rather break a promise, I would rather be dishonourable than stay with them. It's impossible to me to stay with them. But the greatest impossibility can never be explained, and could never be understood. Don't let us talk about it. But I can't let Carrie sue me. I must compensate her somehow. I—I shall have to borrow the money."

"Borrow sixteen thousand pounds!"

His eyes were on her. He thought of the black pearls he had given his wife, paid for out of his lucky deal in oil shares. A sudden wild inclination seized him, an inclination that surely was foreign to his naturally crafty and calculating nature.

"Whoever'd lend it to you?"

She thought of Martin Dale. Perhaps, as she did so, her face changed and he read the change. Perhaps, as happens now and then, for once he was enabled to read her mind like

a book opened before him. Anyhow he felt Martin Dale in her, and he said at once:

"How'd it be if I did?"

"Don't laugh at me!" she said, flushing. "Let's go back."

"No—see here! Of course as a business man I know old Carrie's no earthly right to suck you dry for sixteen thou. If she went into court she'd maybe get heavy damages, but she'd never get more than five thousand at the best, and not that if you went into the box and gave your version of the break—whatever it is. But if you're determined on a thing I know by experience—" he gave a wry smile—"What a hard head you've got, and how much use it is talking. Suppose I lend you the money I should want solid guarantees."

"Guarantees?"

"Yes. I'm a business man. I'm not one to go out into the street and give away cash to the passers by. You'd have to give me guarantees."

"How could I? What guarantees?"

"Say you'd bind yourself to act for me, in London and anywhere else we agreed upon, for a term of years, at a fixed salary—oh, I'd give you a high one, more than I'd give anyone else—and hand half that salary over to me every week till the debt was paid. How'd that be?"

"But it would take me years and years."

"Are you much good at arithmetic?"

"No. But I can understand ordinary figures."

"Know how many weeks there are in a year?"

"I don't care to joke about this. It's terribly serious for me."

"Sometimes it's better to joke than to be deadly serious. But anyhow! Say I give you two hundred and fifty pounds a week. You'd be worth it to me in London, and on a world tour."

"A world tour?"

"With that play of Dale's that I've got—for England."

"You'd undertake to give me back, or let me keep back each Treasury night, a hundred and twenty-five pounds. At that rate in a year I'd be getting from you six thousand five hundred pounds. That right?"

After a long pause, during which Valentine frowned under her now wild copper-coloured hair, she said:

"I believe so."

"Take it from me—it is right. In two years I've had from you thirteen thousand pounds. In less than three years the whole debt's cleared. And mind you'd have a hundred and twenty-five a week to live on. What do you think of it?"

"But how could you pay over such a sum as sixteen thousand pounds now?"

"I could do it. I've been in luck lately."

"But you'd stand out of the interest on it!"

"Then bind yourself to me by contract for five years, and get Dale to let us have the world rights of his play. He'll do it for you. And I'll get all my money back and more. That play's a star play. There's a fortune in it with you acting the chief part. You can travel it as Genevieve Ward—you never saw her, did you?"

"No. But of course I know all about her."

"Well, as she travelled 'Forget-me-not.' We should both come out winners. The only trouble is that that damned old Carrie Gee... pockets her money at your expense."

"That's nothing! I don't mind that!"

"I was wrong about you. Whatever you are you're no business woman."

"I consider that Carrie is within her rights in asking for compensation," said Valentine, very gravely and finally.

"I should like to see her face when she gets the cheque," said Champion grimly. "And do you know what she's going to do, if I know anything of her?"

"What?" Valentine asked, but with only a faint show of interest.

"Let the theatre right away at a thumping profit rental. You see if I'm not right."

"We must go in. The tide's coming in and it will soon be getting dark. And you have the long drive back to London."

"With your promise in my pocket I shan't grumble about that."

"Oh, but I can't promise to-night," she said quickly, restively.

And she drew down her brows under the copper-coloured hair.

"Take your time then," he said. "If you find you can get the money some other way you'll give me the kick no doubt."

As he said that a strangely bitter, but also a very human, an intimately human, sound came into his voice, and for a moment his large face looked almost pathetic in a heavy, jowly, sort of way.

"Seems to me you'll never look on me as a human being!" he added. "But I may be more human than you think for."

"I ought to be very grateful to you," she said. "For having such a belief in me as an actress."

Champion opened his big mouth. His face was suffused with a dull flush beneath his drawn-down motor-cap, on each side of which his large, coarse ears stood out prominently. He was evidently on the verge of saying something violent. But perhaps the inherent craftiness of him got hold of him just then. For he didn't speak for a moment. And then he only said:

"Remember that day in the theatre when I told you before them all that you'd got me beat?"

"Yes. You made me cry."

"Did I? Did I though? I never knew that before. Made you cry—did I?"

Valentine nodded without speaking.

"Well, girl, ever since that day I've sworn that if ever I put my money, bald-headed, on an actress I'd put it on you. Give me the chance to do it. That's all I ask."

"I'm grateful to you," she said, and for the first time she spoke with a feeling which made him know he had touched her. "But I can't let you know to-night."

"I'll give you a week. Can't give you more. If you don't let me know in a week the thing's off."

"I will let you know in a week. How fast the tide's coming in. It's racing behind us."

She shivered.

"Cold?" he asked.

She didn't answer. When she spoke again she said:

"Here are the steps."

CHAPTER XL

"IS she coming back or isn't she?" asked Trever two days later in the managers' room at the London Playhouse. "I'm sick of hanging about and not knowing what we're going to do. Besides, the play's going to nothing. It was a flash in the pan after all. No stamina in it."

"Valentine Morris was the stamina in it," said Miss Geean dryly.

Trever flushed angrily.

"Well, you've seen her, I believe. Is she coming back?"

"No. She's not coming back."

"Not! Then what about your money?"

"I'll take care of that."

"But what are you going to do about her letting us down like this? Sue her?"

"Do you wish me to sue her?" asked Miss Geean, fixing her cold grey eyes on him.

His eyes met hers for an instant, then looked away uneasily.

"That's your affair," he said. "But it affects me too. She and I are co-managers here with your money behind us. Of course I can go on alone. But she ought to pay compensation for letting us down like this, heavy compensation. Don't forget my position."

"And don't you forget that I call the tune here."

"Of course I know that. Well, what are you going to do?"

"Take Constantine's play off at once and get rid of the theatre."

Trever sat for a moment like a man stunned.

"Get rid of——" he faltered, then raised his voice. "But what about me? What about my contract? What about my salary?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to whistle for it," said Miss Geean, with stony calmness.

"Oh, come now! You aren't going to get out of it like this! I'm in management here—and——"

"And a nice mess you've made of it! You've driven the woman who drew all the money out of the theatre. She'll

never come back because of your folly. It's owing to you that's she's left us. You've made it impossible for her to work with you. Now I know the whole truth——"

"You don't mean to say she—what did she tell you?"

"You really wish me to repeat it?"

The angry flush on Trever's face grew deeper.

"If you believe all the lies a jealous woman tells you, then——"

"This play comes off next Saturday," said Miss Geean, interrupting him with biting emphasis. "And as I told you, I'm going to let the theatre."

"Then what am I going to do?"

"Whatever you like. I'm afraid you're of no further use to me. I back people who draw money."

"I can get a hundred pounds a week, and more, in any theatre in London if I only hold up my hand!"

"Then if I were you I should hold up both hands!" said Miss Geean, getting up and beginning to fasten her sable coat.

"Look here, Carrie!" blustered Trever, getting up too and assuming a fierce expression. "I'm not going to be thrown off like this as if I were a soiled glove."

"Until you can forget cheap melodrama you'll never be any good as a star."

"I am a star."

"If you are you're such a remote one that your light doesn't penetrate into my theatre. And that's all that matters to me."

"I shall sue you for breach of contract."

"Do so! But I shall be very sorry for you when I put Valentine Morris into the witness-box."

Trever stared at her without speaking. She looked at him with menace in her eyes.

"Well, are you going to sue me?"

His eyes fell before hers. A faint smile altered her pale round face.

"Good-night!" she said. "The notice goes up for next Saturday."

She hadn't bothered to tell Trever that she had already got rid of the remainder of the lease of the London Playhouse on terms which would bring her a handsome profit.

CHAPTER XLI

VALENTINE had had Dale's letter written in Trieste. It had touched her more than any of the messages she had received since the death of Brian. But till now she hadn't replied to it except by telegram: "Thank you for your dear letter love—Valentine." She hadn't felt able to write a letter to Dale. More formal expressions of sympathy she had answered briefly and formally. To "Uncle Martin" she could only write intimately, and the time for intimate writing about her unexpected loss hadn't come yet. Besides she expected Dale to arrive in England any day now. Even his letter had seemed to her full of the sound of hurrying feet, of feet hurrying to her. But he didn't come. And now, after Champion's visit to Birchington, she wanted Dale. She wanted him strangely, was uneasy, restless for him.

Champion had given her a week in which to come to a decision. And she knew that he had meant it, that he would only give her a week. His extraordinary offer to her wouldn't remain "open" for more than seven days. The business man in Champion mightn't be always paramount but he always lurked under the other man in Champion. She would have to decide in a week.

That was why she now wanted Dale so much: she wanted to consult him about what she should do. Why was he lingering? Why didn't he come back? When he had written his letter in Trieste he had said that he was "convalescing after influenza." It seemed to her that his convalescence was a very long process.

Suddenly it occurred to her that this process had perhaps been interrupted by a return of his malady, and fear came into her heart. If Martin should follow the path little Brian had taken! What a friend she would lose!

She went to the Birchington Post Office and telegraphed to Dale at Trieste—"Why do you not come back want you badly—Valentine."

She had chosen the words with a mind intent on her needs not on his. Though she valued Dale so greatly as a friend she was still so far away from love of him that she wasn't able intimately to realise his love for her; for the one who

doesn't love never fully understands the longing and the suffering of the one who does love. So she sent her careless telegram of an egotist to Dale and waited eagerly for an answer. He could come to her before the week was over, if he chose to come and wasn't prevented by illness.

An answering telegram destroyed her hopes.

"Have had pneumonia getting better but doctor absolutely forbids my returning to England till the late spring as y u are not acting couldn't you meet me on Italian Riviera—love—Martin."

So. She must come to her decision alone! Or should she—? No; it was too far. She couldn't leave England before she had put some order into her affairs. And, besides, she was terribly "hard up." She had debts. Her big salary, as actress and co-manager at the London Playhouse, had suddenly ceased. The cost of a long journey, of a sojourn abroad in some expensive hotel, was out of the question for her. She must just stay where she was and decide. And she wired to Martin a message of sympathy and regret that she couldn't come out to him.

When this second telegram had gone on its way she had a more definite feeling of loneliness. She had lost Brian. She had parted finally from Mark Trever, and moreover had parted finally from any last illusion that had still obstinately clung to her about him. As Dale knew she had seen Trever with painful, almost with pitiless, clearness. But, as Dale did not know, she had had strange moments of abandonment, when her critical judgment had been swallowed up by yearnings connected with the flesh, but in which the spirit, at moments, exquisite, terrible moments, had seemed to take part. Now she saw Trever as a man with whom she was horribly ashamed to have been intimate. She looked at him from afar, haunted by the thought, "And once I loved, gave myself to—that!" Carrie Geean, with whom she had been on terms of intimacy, and on whom she had for a time sincerely relied, had become simply a greedy woman, whom her overpowering impulse had injured, and who would sue her in the law courts for damages, unless she was promptly paid a sum of money which, to Valentine, seemed enormous. Her mother, broken down by the death of Brian, drowned in sorrow, was a poor companion for her. As she had told Champion her mother was afraid

of her, was afraid of her brain. She was timid with her daughter and too humble.

Valentine was lonely. And in loneliness she must now come at once to a big decision.

She took long walks alone by the sea. Even after it was dark she went out, and walked in the bare country within sound of the sea. Her mother went to bed, wondering, unable to understand her daughter, proud of her, humble before her, but unable to understand her. And Valentine stayed out very late, sometimes on the cliff, sometimes in the cliff garden, sometimes down below on the deserted sands where the surf showed white, faintly white, in the darkness.

Her reason said to her that there was no question as to what her decision would be. She had made a promise to Carrie. It had been a wild promise, perhaps. But she had made it. She had promised to pay the cost of yielding to a passionate impulse. And she could only pay the cost by accepting Champion's extraordinary offer. Therefore she must surely accept it.

But she was reluctant, dreadfully reluctant, to accept it. And that was why she walked perpetually alone in the daylight, grey daylight, and darkness. She had been tied, by a contract, and had broken away, fiercely, bursting the bonds. Now she was going to let herself be fastened up again, to be chained to a man, for five years? Where then was freedom? She had a deep, instinctive love of her art, she had even a deep, instinctive belief in her powers. But she wanted to exercise them in freedom. She wanted to work, she wanted desperately to work, to be obliged to work hard because of the sorrow which gnawed at her and wouldn't cease. She had spoken the simple truth to Carrie Geean about her sudden resolve to go on acting while Brian's body lay unburied. But she wanted to work at liberty. She stretched out her arms in the wind, in the loneliness of the spacious and murmuring night, full of significant murmurs, of sighs from the far away.

"I want space all round me! Not arms! Not clutching hands! I want to express myself and my sorrow in space!"

But she had to pay for an impulse. She had to write a cheque for emotion. And she couldn't do it without selling her talent to Champion at a price.

Then—must she sell it?

There didn't seem any other way out.

And at any rate Champion understood one part of her, understood it and respected it, the artist part. He would be careful of that. His coarseness would keep away from that. The brutal hand of him wouldn't be laid on that ever. There was something in him more subtle, more delicate, than anything in Carrie or in Mark Trever. It was even almost tender. When she thought of that something, remembered it, Valentine felt her reluctance to tie herself up to Champion diminishing. If she did what he wished her to do, he would certainly help the artistic part of her to increase in value. For that part of her he most genuinely believed in and delighted in. Without his understanding of, and odd reverence for, that she could never have got on with him even as well as she had. And surely he was able to be magnanimous. For, looking back, she realised how she had flouted him in his own theatre. She had paid him back in good, sound coin for his brutal behaviour to her when she had been poor, striving, anxious, an unknown quantity. She had paid him back—and he had forgiven her. There was, perhaps, something almost fine in the man.

But she could never feel safe with him as she felt with Dale.

But didn't she feel too safe with Dale?

She thought of Mark Trever, of Champion, of Dale. She cared for Dale. In a way she almost loved Dale. Yes—but it was "in a way." And what a pity that was! For she knew that Dale loved her, would go on loving her, understood her better than all other men did, perhaps—except one. He would marry her, if she would let him. And if he did he would be faithful. He would stick to her. He would protect her. He would stand up for her. He would work for her, give her work she could be her truest, her best self in. All this he would do. And in time, no doubt, he would help her to settle with Carrie Geean.

But she didn't love him in the way he wanted, and had a right to expect if she married him. And because he was so sincere and so true she could never be insincere with him. And so she could never marry him. When he was standing up, and she looked at him, she always wished that his legs were not so short.

When she remembered that by the sea the question of whether she would ever be able to marry Dale was settled for her.

And Champion? Something in her was sometimes afraid of Champion. And perhaps that very fear worked in Champion's favour.

Six days of the seven Champion had given to Valentine to make up her mind in had passed when she received by the morning post two short notes. One was from Carrie Geean. She wrote that she had already got rid of the lease of the London Playhouse, and wished to go abroad as soon as possible to Monte Carlo. That being so she would be glad to know what Valentine intended to do about that little matter of compensation, as she wished "to settle things up" before leaving England. The other note was from Champion, announcing that he would "run down" to Birchington on the following day to receive her answer to his proposition.

"I'm bringing some documents with me in case you care to sign them," he wrote. "If you decide against signing I shall have to cry off. But I think you must by now have come to the conclusion that it will be to your advantage to cast in your lot with me, for a time at any rate." In a postscript there was added the following message, "My wife sends her love."

That postscript surprised Valentine. But when she had looked at it for two or three minutes, had considered it, got accustomed to it, she found that it had had an oddly tranquillizing effect upon her. So Champion had evidently kept his wife informed of what he was trying to bring about, and she was in favour of it. Valentine found herself being glad of that, being relieved by that. Mrs. Champion was an impossible woman, a foundation of vulgarity with a top-dressing of insincere sweetness and awful gentility. Still she was Champion's wife, and her apparent lack of all jealousy in this matter of the suggested alliance seemed to point to something the thought of which diminished in Valentine an uneasiness which had persecuted her during the last days.

"Perhaps I've been a fool!" she said to herself. "A vain fool."

That night she walked again by the sea. The wind blew coldly but she stayed out till very late. When she let herself into the silent house, and shut out the wind and the insistent voice of the sea, a thought pierced her:

"Is this my last night of freedom?"

CHAPTER XLII

JUST before noon on the following day Champion's long and low yellow car glided through the gateway of "The Bungalows" and stopped gently at the back of "Lamorva." Champion got out carrying a flat dispatch case under his arm.

"I shall probably be here some time, Pring," he said to his chauffeur. "You can do what you like for an hour at least. I may lunch here. If I do I'm sure Mrs. Morris will let you have dinner with the maids."

"Thank you, sir."

Champion went up two steps, walked along a narrow covered passage with a trellis on the left side, and the house wall on the other, and pushed the bell. As he waited for an answer to his ring he shifted uneasily, tapped a foot two or three times on the smooth red pavement, took the dispatch case from under his arm, held it in both hands, put it back. There was a little unusual colour at the top of each of his big close shaven cheeks, a small patch on either cheek bone.

When the maid came he slipped in at once with a muttered: "Good morning."

He left his coat and hat in the little hall, and the maid showed him in to the small room at the side of the house in which Miss Geean had had her interview with Valentine. He laid his dispatch case down on the writing-table, put his hand inside his blue double-breasted jacket and brought out a letter. As he did this Valentine came into the room.

"Hulloh!" he said. "I started early to be here in good time. How are you?"

His voice sounded less assured than usual.

"Good morning."

He took her right hand, and smiled uneasily.

"I've brought you the documents, you see! Oh, by the way, and here's a note from my wife."

He handed Valentine the letter he had been holding.

"Oh, thank you."

She tore the envelope, and took out a double sheet of thick scented mauve paper, with a large gold monogram and an address in gold lettering at the top.

"MY DEAR MISS MORRIS,

"My husband has told me of his desire to entice you back to our theatre. This is only to express to you my fervent hope that you will return to us. I look upon you as a mascot. Really I do. We've had no luck at all since you left us. Do come back and wake up the box office for us, as you did before. You were *great* in Mr. Constantine's marvellous play. There's nobody like you. We *do* want you back.

"Tenderest regards,

"Yours affectionately and hopefully,

"AIMEE VIRGINIA CHAMPION."

Valentine looked up from this letter to Champion. Perhaps he saw something in her eyes which alarmed him, for he said hastily :

"What's she say ? "

"It's very kind."

She gave it to him.

"Well, this is all right ! Except that rot about the box office and about Constantine's bloo—Constantine's rotten play. But she's got no taste, never has had. You mustn't mind her. She has a great opinion of you now, and she can't stand Miss Eden at any price."

"Oh—she can't stand Miss Eden ! "

"Well, what I mean is she hates Miss Eden's acting."

"I see."

"Now I'll show you the contract I've had drawn up."

He fumbled, got the case open, took out two documents.

"Here's the contract. Read it carefully. Study it. I want you to be satisfied. It's all plain enough. But look it over at your leisure."

She took one of the documents.

"May I have a look at your library meanwhile ? "

"Do ! But it's hardly a library."

"I don't know that. There's a lot of books here."

He turned his broad back on her and went to study the shelves. He even took down the first book that came to hand.

"L'Immoraliste—André Gide," he read.

He put it back, took down another.

"Thais—Anatole France."

Champion had a rough knowledge of both French and German, sufficient to get at the gist of a play in either

of those languages. He opened Thais and ran his eyes over a page.

But he was thinking of the woman behind him.

Presently—after, he thought, a very long time—he heard her say:

"I don't understand this paragraph."

He turned round quickly.

"Which one?"

"The one referring to the sum of money I shall have to pay back to you. It says here 'sixteen thousand pounds, or such other sum as shall be agreed between Miss Caroline Geean and the party of the first part'—that is you. What does that mean?"

"It means that you leave me to deal with old Carrie and I'll make the best terms for you I can. What she put up to you was a mere try on. She doesn't expect to get it or anything like it."

"But——"

"Has she told you she's got rid of the theatre with a damned big profit?"

"No."

"Well she has—to the Steinberg Brothers of New York. Their agent snapped it up at the first bite. She's going to come out o' this a big winner. Trever's looking for an engagement. And Carrie's off to Monte Carlo almost directly."

Valentine sat still for a minute looking at the contract. Then she said:

"Carrie is clever."

"Damned clever! But there's others who are clever too. You leave me to deal with her, and you'll be drawing your full salary on Treasury night and keeping it in under a year. I'll promise that."

"But how can I leave you to deal with Carrie?"

"You'll be under contract to me. You've left it in my hands. I shall be acting as your agent."

"But I gave Carrie to understand——"

"See here! Did you tell her flatly you'd give her sixteen thousand pounds?"

"No."

"What did you tell her?"

"She said I ought to pay her sixteen thousand pounds compensation."

" I'll bet she did, the old she-devil ! "

" Don't ! "

" And what did you say ? "

" When I refused finally to go back I said I'd manage somehow to pay her compensation."

" Without naming the sum ? "

" I didn't name any sum, but I suppose she thought——"

" Thought she'd got to do with a mug ! Now don't be angry. You're an artist and not a business woman—except with me ! You were pretty hard with me, but I suppose you thought you were up against it. Well, never mind what Carrie thought. I'll soon get her to think different. She'll find no flies on me. Sign and leave her to me."

" I'll—I'll just read to the end."

" Of course ! "

When she had finished she said : " I see you've signed this already."

" Yes."

" And this other document ? "

" It's a copy of the one you've just read."

" Oh ? "

" Run through it if you like. I've signed it, too, and Meyer's witnessed it."

" But Mr. Grant ? "

" He goes out at the close of the present run. I've bought him out. I mean to be sole master of the Central in the future. You and me'll work together. Come on, Miss Morris, put your name to it. And you and me'll show London something worth while ! "

There was an eager excitement in his look, in his manner.

" We'll give them something good. We'll have no more wallowing in the Constantine trough."

" No—no ! " she said. " No more Constantine. . . . Yes, I see it's a copy."

" And signed by me."

" Yes, I see."

" I've done my part. Now it's for you ! "

He went over to the writing-table and picked up a pen.

" One of your maids can witness your signature, or my man, Pring, if you like."

But still she hesitated obviously. She was conscious—and he was aware of it in her—of an intense reluctance to put her name to the documents which lay there before

her, to part with the freedom which she had gained at a price.

But the price hadn't been paid yet. And how could she pay it if she didn't put her name to that contract?

She looked at it. Then her eyes fell on Mrs. Champion's note which lay on the writing-table near it. Mrs. Champion wanted her to go back to the Central Theatre because of the box office. Had she any other reason too? And Champion's reason? He believed in Valentine as an actress. That was certain. He wanted to bring out her talent, to lead it on to big things. Something within her was positive of that. Then why should she hesitate?

* * * * *

"Miss Morris!"

"Yes."

"Shall I ring for a witness?"

It seemed to Champion that more than a minute passed before she answered, in a reluctant voice:

"Very well."

CHAPTER XLIII

VALENTINE'S telegram to Dale had had an effect which she, in her self-concentration, hadn't anticipated, had never thought of as possible. It had roused active hope in him. She had released herself from the, by Dale uncomprehended, dominion of Trever at last, and following that release she had telegraphed to Dale: "Why do you not come back want you badly love—Valentine." Wasn't it natural that such a message in a moment so important, the moment of release, should cause Dale to think that perhaps his chance had come at last? He did think this, and Valentine's telegraphed refusal to join him on the Italian Riviera, though of course it disappointed him, didn't kill his new hope. He could well understand that she couldn't get away from England just when her life, both her private and her professional life, had undergone such a drastic, and unexpected, change

owing to Brian's death and the severance of her connection with the London Playhouse. She wasn't as free as he was. What had happened at the theatre he of course didn't know, but it must surely have been something tremendous. His instinct connected it with the death of Brian. The birth of the short-lived child hadn't drawn his parents together. His death had, perhaps, divided them for ever. He remembered that discovery he had made at Ciro's, the discovery of Trever's ferocious professional jealousy of Valentine. That, too, had perhaps contributed to this unexpected and sensational break. But the death of Brian had surely something to do with it. And now no doubt Valentine had to settle many things before making a fresh start. For even if she were stricken she couldn't be idle for long. Want of money, if nothing else, would drive her to work. Dale was certain that she hadn't saved much, if any, money. She spent with both hands. Extravagance was one of her faults.

"If she marries me she shall have no more trouble about money," Dale said to himself. "I'll work for her, and with her. We'll go ahead hand in hand."

But would she ever marry him?

He thought that just possible now. He was able to hope it. For she had had a terrible lesson in love. Surely she would turn now towards the love that was safe, that could not injure or wound, that wanted only to make secure, to make happy.

But she was incalculable. He knew that. He didn't forget that even now. She might do the last thing one would expect her to do. He wished he could go back to England.

But that was impossible. His illness had been serious. It had left him very weak, so weak that he wasn't just then the man to defy doctor's orders. He knew he couldn't face the English climate till much later in the year, when the warmth could be depended on. Valentine wouldn't come to him, wasn't easily able to no doubt. He simply couldn't go to her. He must endure an interval of waiting, of suspense. When at last he was in a fit state to travel he went to Porto Fino.

While he was there he received one day the following telegram: "Miss Morris under contract to me for five years wish to produce your play at the Central as soon as possible when can you be back—Champion."

This telegram startled Dale, gave him a shock, created instantly in him a furious condition of restlessness, which

seemed to him not only mental but physical, acutely physical. He was, he knew it, violently excited by this piece of news. The playwright in him was excited, naturally. But the lover in him was excited, too.

Valentine under contract to Champion for five years! Why did that statement, as his eyes stared at the thin bit of paper, look sinister to Dale? Why did each separate word of it, now that he had read the whole sentence, look sinister? Swiftly all that he knew, and had instinctively gathered up, about Champion seemed to press upon Dale's mind, to crowd upon it, making it uneasy, hurting it. Valentine had released herself from Trever, and already she was bound to another man, and that man Champion. Of course this was a mere matter of business, and was probably very advantageous to Valentine in more ways than one. Champion must certainly be giving her a very good salary. She would act again in the fine theatre which had seen her first success. And Champion would take care of her talent. Dale knew that. The one and only tenderness he had ever discovered in Champion was a tenderness for Valentine's curious and unusual talent. He had an odd faith in the lasting quality of that tenderness.

Nevertheless, as he looked at that sentence, he saw it as sinister.

He remembered, with a painful accuracy, a conversation he had had with Valentine in which she had used the expression, "clawing males," and an outburst of hers—hadn't it almost been a cry?—"That would be classic!" Classic to be free from the everlasting intrusion of eager men into the life of her art!

And now she had tied herself up to Champion—and for five years!

Yet—why not? What better thing could she have done in theatre-land? What better thing could she have done, and not only for herself but also for him, Dale? Champion had the rights of his play, and now that play could be produced with Valentine in it, was going to be produced, and soon. Here was cause for rejoicing surely. And yet Dale couldn't rejoice. He couldn't concentrate on the obvious benefit to him of this new departure. There was a creeping fear of Champion in him.

And wasn't there, too, a creeping fear of Valentine?

It was now late in the month of March. But even in the

sheltered corner of Italy in which Dale was staying the sunshine wasn't really warm, or didn't seem really warm to him in his weak state of health after the radiant climate of Egypt. England, of course, would be much colder, much more dangerous to him, with its treacherous and abrupt changes of climate, its capricious April weather. Yet he felt an urge to go home at once which was almost irresistible. Should he risk it? For a day or two he couldn't make up his mind and sent no reply to the telegram from Champion. Then Valentine telegraphed:

"Are you still ill very anxious for your return at once if possible love—Valentine."

When this telegram came Dale packed up and took the train to Genoa. On arriving in Genoa he went to a first-rate Italian doctor, put the situation before him, and asked for an examination and a decision as to whether it would be safe to go at once to England or not. The doctor examined him carefully, asked him a number of questions, then forbade him to travel to England before the first week in May. He might go, if he liked, to the French Riviera, but he must, if he wanted to get really strong and to avoid serious risk, stay on in the South till May.

Still persecuted by the restlessness of body and mind which Champion's telegram had waked in him Dale bought a ticket for Monte Carlo, after sending telegrams to Champion and Valentine, telling them that he couldn't go to England at once, but would be there in the first days of May. He felt that he couldn't bear to remain in Italy. Monte Carlo was on the road home. He would stay there for a few days, and then make his way down the Riviera, staying at Nice, Cannes, St. Raphael, and so to Marseille and onward. He might put in finally a few days at Avignon at the end of April. So—he would be moving, moving, and always towards Valentine.

The restlessness in him demanded that.

When he reached Monte Carlo he went to the Hotel Windsor. He was tired—since his illness he got tired very easily—and did nothing on the day of his arrival. On the following morning, as the weather was brilliant, he was out soon after eleven. He bought some London papers at a Kiosk, and took them down to the terrace in front of the Casino.

There were a great many people strolling about in the blue and gold. The general atmosphere of gaiety and life stirred

Dale after the quiet of Porto Fino. He felt a little more cheerful, glad that he had come. And he felt distinctly nearer to Valentine. He sat down on a seat under an awning and opened a paper. But he didn't read it. His eyes couldn't leave the people.

He saw many Jews of various and vague nationalities; many smart women, French, English, American; some ancient beauties marvellously made up, protecting their artificial complexions with the latest mode of sun umbrellas; old men with lined faces and haggard eyes, some of whom looked like played out millionaires, others like professors gone wrong. There were pretty girls, most of whom looked excessively aware of being pretty. There were a good many young men, Frenchmen smartly dressed and actively talkative, Americans self-possessed and prosperous, with critical eyes, Englishmen nonchalant, yet self-conscious, not troubling much about conversation. And there were those indefinite people, both women and men, who are always to be seen in the season at Monte Carlo, about whom all that one can be certain of is that they are thoroughly unsafe, and had best be avoided. They are out to pluck the feathers from the prosperous. That is obvious. For the rest their lives, their characters, their origins, their upbringing—all that matters—are hidden in impenetrable shade.

Dale was watching some of these, the adventurers of the world, whose greatest asset is self-possession, in many cases backed by absolute daring, and musing on the unsafe existence which he had never known, and, characteristically, thinking of how a drama might be woven round the woof of a great adventurer's life, when he saw at a little distance two women strolling slowly along in the sunshine, accompanied by a marvellous white Pomeranian, whose snow-white thick coat of hair made him look like a wonderful snowball ornamented with a broad riband and enormous bow of rose-coloured satin. One of the women was tall, old but well preserved, with a still beautiful neck and smooth white skin, a still clever figure and a false look of youth. The other was Caroline Geean. Yes, Caroline Geean dressed in lettuce green, with a lettuce green hat and an emerald or two here and there, and a sunshade with a jade handle, and a knot of orchids tucked cleverly in at one side of her gown, and dark coloured spectacles veiling her watchful grey eyes.

Those watchful eyes didn't miss Dale under his awning.

for she nodded and lifted a hand. And then Dale got up, folded his papers together and went to her.

"One meets everyone here, but I didn't expect to meet you," she said.

She kept his hand in hers for a rather long time, smiling faintly.

"D'you know Mrs. Masters? Then let me—Mrs. Masters, this is Mr. Martin Dale. I'm sure you saw his brilliant play at the Central Theatre."

Mrs. Masters, a famous beauty, and subduer of men, in retreat, said in a slightly husky voice that of course she had seen and loved it. Dale walked along beside the two ancient lights—for he now could never think of Carrie Geean as anything but old—and they gossiped for twenty minutes. Then he said he must go.

"Are you at the Paris?" asked Miss Geean.

"Oh no! But I'm sure you are."

She was, of course, and she asked him to dine with her in the restaurant that night at nine o'clock, "quite alone with me." He accepted and went. Indeed he went almost eagerly. For he had a writer's desire to study a little more closely the "savage materialist wrapped up in satin," and he hoped to learn something of Valentine.

After a few questions about his health—she had heard of his illness—Egypt, his wanderings, Miss Geean said, with a sort of soft bluntness,

"I've lost Valentine. You knew it of course."

"Oh yes. And Champion's engaged her."

"For five years at a big salary."

"Is it?"

"Very big. Yes, Champion's got her now."

When she said that Dale felt uncomfortable.

"That's a brute, but a clever brute," she added.

And Dale felt that she understood Champion and admired him.

"You don't know him, do you?" he said.

"Yes—now. But I didn't know him till quite lately. His wife's appalling. The first time I saw her she was dressed in mouse-coloured plush with big long turquoise earrings. A rash of turquoise and diamond brooches had broken out all over her chest. And she had a bangle on her left ankle. That was too much for me. I made up my mind on the spot

to keep clear of her and her husband. She's plush. I remember telling you once that I hated the screech in art. A woman like Mrs. Champion is the screech in life. But Champion isn't plush, he's granite. And now he's got Valentine for five years."

Dale felt intensely irritated by this reiteration. It got on his nerves. But he was resolved that he wouldn't show his feeling before those steady eyes, and he only said,

"He'll probably bring on her talent. He has the power to do it and I believe he has the will."

"I daresay. D'you know why I lost Valentine? But of course you do! Of course she's told you."

"No; she hasn't."

"She had an upset with Mark Trever."

"An upset?"

"Yes. It was immediately after the death of her dear little boy. You know Trever was his father?"

"Was he?"

"She never told me so. But I'm quite sure he was."

"Really!"

"Before her child was buried she came to the theatre to act. I wasn't there unfortunately. If I'd have been there she'd have been with us still. She wanted to work, felt she must work just because of her sorrow. You understand?"

Dale nodded.

"She's an extraordinary creature. Trever saw her alone. He was determined she shouldn't act. He's a fool, as of course you know. And he's as common as they make them under his gift. He was in love with Valentine's understudy, a Miss Carrington, and determined to give Miss Carrington a chance—to show she couldn't act. And he wanted to prove to me, and to Valentine, too, I suppose, that *he* was the *real* draw in the theatre and she wasn't. In short he was a leading man."

"You're rather hard on the profession."

"I am without illusions."

"That's obvious."

"What happened exactly between Valentine and Trever that night—*exactly*—probably no one will ever know. But she didn't act. And she broke her contract with me and left us. I went down to Birchington and tried to persuade her to come back. But you know what Valentine is. The intangible things have power over her. She refused

to come back. She preferred to pay me compensation and leave me."

"Compensation!" said Dale, as if startled.

"Naturally I couldn't let her half ruin me."

Dale looked at her and then said slowly,

"No, I suppose not."

"It was her will against mine. I let her go on terms."

"I quite understand."

"Champion settled for her. That's how I got to know him."

Once again Dale was unpleasantly aware of a strong movement of the blood, one of those betraying movements which he hated and was even afraid of. He looked down for a moment and crumbled his bread.

"Have some more champagne! Garçon!"

She had seen it. Useless to hope that those watchful eyes had missed it.

He sipped his champagne "to give himself a countenance."

"Oh, Champion settled!"

"Yes. As Valentine was a friend I let her off very easily. Of course her going meant the loss of thousands to me. I ought to have had sixteen thousand at least as compensation."

Dale repressed an exclamation.

"Or even more. But because it was Valentine I let her go for five. Champion paid it—to get her. I suppose he thinks she's worth it to *him*."

"I—I daresay he does."

"And now I suppose they'll do your play?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, I let the theatre and I'm well out of it all. Backing theatres is a ticklish business. But it amuses me. And between you and me I've always got out with a profit up to now. I believe in your talent, Mr. Dale. So if you ever write another play, as strong as your first, and Valentine isn't to be in it, you might remember that, as the racegoers say, I'm always ready to back my fancy. But it must be *my* fancy!"

"I'll remember. Thanks very much."

"Shall we go over to the rooms for a little while?"

"Yes, let us."

That night Dale lost twenty pounds at the tables and Carrie Geean won sixteen hundred.

CHAPTER XLIV

WHEN she had signed the new contract with Champion Valentine was overcome by a feeling of fatalism. She saw herself as a woman labouring under the ordained. Often she had longed almost angrily for freedom. Now she often thought of freedom as an illusion of the mind, a marvel imagined by man which did not really exist. It was certainly the fate of an actress to exercise and display her talent in close connection with other human beings. She was forced to depend upon others, to act with people whom she generally cared nothing about, or perhaps even despised or disliked. The theatre was like a net which enclosed her and many others with her. No actress, however great, could be really free in her art. But could anyone be free? Was anyone free? What was freedom?

And yet she was tortured by the desire to be in liberty. Since the death of Brian and her final break away from Mark Trever life seemed to weigh on her. Yet Brian's death and the break with Mark Trever had brought her release: the one release from motherhood, the other release from a tyranny which she had inexplicably bowed her neck under for years. She had been frightened about Brian, so frightened that, as she had told Dale, she had not been certain of the depth of her love for him. She had dreaded as time went on lest she should find Mark Trever in Brian. Death had taken that dread away from her. And Mark Trever at last had found the means to destroy her incomprehensible infatuation for him. She ought surely to feel more free, though perhaps miserably free, than she had felt for many years.

But she had signed that contract with Champion.

She had hesitated to sign it, but what else could she do? She saw now the folly of her reckless extravagance. Not only she hadn't saved money: she had run up debts. The announcement in the newspapers of her departure from the London Playhouse had waked up her creditors. Pressing demands for payment had been made upon her. If she hadn't agreed to Champion's proposals she might have been forced into bankruptcy. And Carrie would certainly have been pitiless. Now Carrie was placated. But there were still the creditors to be satisfied.

She resolved to get rid of the lease of her London house, and to have a sale of its contents, of all the beautiful things with which she had so eagerly surrounded herself since she had become famous. Away with them! Suddenly she felt that she had to be rid of them, and she saw them as impedimenta. Bareness! Hadn't that some relation to freedom? She would strip herself of these weighing things. She would reduce her life to simplicity.

Without saying anything to her mother she consulted her solicitor and visited a famous firm of house agents. The solicitor said he would arrange to have her possessions valued by a competent man. A partner in the firm of land agents told her that he was sure he could easily find a client to take the house off her hands. She felt relieved, almost happy. An extraordinary longing to strip herself, her life, was upon her.

When Champion told her of the bargain he had succeeded in making with Carrie she was astonished, and at first couldn't believe him.

"Five thousand pounds! I can't believe that," she said.

She looked closely at Champion, and suddenly anger came into her eyes.

"Are you trying to spare me? Are you telling me what isn't true so that I should have less to pay over to you?" she said.

"Not a bit of it. Go and ask old Carrie if you think I'm a liar. She'll tell you the same story."

She saw by his eyes, read in his manner, that he had told her the truth.

"Five thousand instead of sixteen!" she said.

"And she ought to be thankful to get five. She didn't want legal business any more than you did. As to sixteen thousand pounds that was nothing but a colossal piece of bluff. She thought she'd got a soft thing in you. But when she found I was the negotiator she was soon ready to climb down. Besides she'd got rid of the theatre, kicked Trever into the street, and was longing to be off to Monte. When I took out my cheque book, and she saw another five thousand just waiting to walk into her banking account, why the got almost gentle. If I'd had a mind I believe I could have stroked her."

"I'm very grateful to you," said Valentine.

And she said it as if she meant it.

"I'll—I'll try and work for you in a way that'll satisfy you," she added.

"And I'll try and fit you with work that'll satisfy you," he answered, with a rough intensity that startled her. "We'll make a start with Dale's play. I've wired him already. You'd better send him a wire, too. I don't think he loves me very much, Master Dale. But he'll attend to you."

It was then that Valentine sent her telegram to Dale. His reply brought matters to a "head", as Champion called it. He went down to Birchington once more to confer with Valentine on what should be done.

The second play in which Grant and he had "presented" Maud Eden had not been a dead failure. It was drawing moderate houses, was just paying its way. Champion would have been glad to take it off at once. It was obvious to Valentine that he was desperately anxious to get rid of Miss Eden and to start at once with the new combination. At the end of the run, when Maud Eden left, Grant was going out of the management.

"It'll be a clean sweep," said Champion. "And the sooner it comes the better. I'm crazy to have you acting in a piece that'll bring back all the worth-while people to see you again."

"You're right. They've given me up," she said, looking half ashamed.

"We'll soon whistle them back. But now this is what I suggest. I've been sitting up best part of the night figuring out what's the best thing to do. As Dale can't be back till some time in May I think we'd better keep the Maud Eden piece running till end of June. For July I've got a fine offer from Reitzenstein's manager for a four week's season. Directly Dale's back we'll start getting ready his play, and produce it in August. We'll prepare it quietly, just we three with the producer, scenic artist and so on, and call the company together for rehearsals beginning of July. I don't believe in too long rehearsals. Makes 'em so stale. Six weeks is my limit. What d'you say?"

"I'm ready to do anything you want," she said.

"Are you though?" he said.

"Don't I owe you a good deal?"

"Only five thousand pounds. And that you'll be able to pay off in under a year, in forty weeks from your start

with me. By the way though, how are you going to get on in the meanwhile ? "

Valentine slightly reddened.

" I shall manage all right," she said.

" Sure ? "

" I'm letting this bungalow at a good rental from May to the end of the summer."

" Well, what about your mother ? "

" She doesn't mind. She'll go into lodgings."

" And what'll you do ? Come back to London ? But your house is up for sale, isn't it ? "

" I don't mean to go to the house. I shall go to a cheap hotel."

" You'd better come to Park Lane," he said, twisting his big lips in a smile that was meant to be humorous.

" Poor Mrs. Champion ! No, thank you."

" My wife would just love it."

" I couldn't stay in anyone's house at present," she said, gravely. " I should be a—I should be a horrible visitor."

" You needn't see much of us. We'll leave you to yourself. I'm speaking now for my wife."

" It's truly good of her. But I *must* live alone. Since—you spoke just now of making a ' clean sweep '. I'm doing that now. I've got to do that. I shall go back to the hotel in Bloomsbury where I was staying when I first met Martin Dale."

" As you please ! But there'll always be a couple of rooms for you in Park Lane if you want them."

" Thank Mrs. Champion for me, please. Tell her how grateful I am to her for thinking of me."

" And you're satisfied with what I suggest about the play ? "

" Perfectly satisfied. I shall stay here with mother till the end of April. Then we give up this house for the summer, and I'll come up to London and be ready for work. Oh, I shall be thankful to work ! "

" And I shall be damned glad to see you at work again and to work with you. You don't know how it hurt when you chucked me for that blasted old Carrie and Trever. But I suppose you hated me then, eh ? "

" I didn't like you very much," she said simply.

He opened his big, loose mouth. She knew he was on the

edge of a question. But he didn't ask it. He had the wisdom not to ask it just then. Instead he said to her,

"I'll send you down the play when I get back to-night. You may like to begin studying it. I shall want your help and advice about the cast and the whole production. I believe in your *flair*. I was pretty rough with you at the start. I acknowledge that. But I didn't know what I'd got. I was fool enough to take a Derby winner for a plater, as you said. I shan't make that mistake with you again."

When his car had driven away into the bare country, which was nevertheless beginning to show reticent signs of the spring, Valentine stood about the two steps of the bungalow marvelling.

How was it possible that she was able to gain any comfort, any relief from her success? Did gratitude influence her? He had settled with Carrie, and in such a way that the *business* of him could be cleared off in less than a year. But no; it wasn't gratitude that had changed her almost loathing for Champion into a different feeling. It was a more subtle thing than that. And presently her sure instinct found it. Champion's genuine and almost delicate appreciation of her peculiar gift, genius perhaps, as an actress, his evident intention to cherish it, to help in bringing it to full flowering, his warm enthusiasm for it, brought to her an amazing sense of relief after the mercenary exploitation of her basest part, as actress, by Carrie Geean and Trever.

It was Champion's understanding of her gift that at last had won her. There was something in that—coming just at this time—which brought to her the feeling, "I have something to rest on." And, because there was strength in the man there was strength in his understanding of her, a maleness in it which reached her. Her appreciation of this understanding was far greater than her appreciation of what he had done for her financially and of his victory over Carrie. She was, as Champion had said, far more artist than business woman.

But she couldn't go to stay in Park Lane. She knew that she could never be really friends, could never be really at ease, with such a woman as Mrs. Champion. Any attempt at real friendship on her part must be spurious. Champion was different. He was different because he understood. He understood, mysteriously it seemed to her, her aims as an artist; he understood her gift; he understood what sort of

material that gift needed for its sustenance ; he even loved her gift.

Did he love anything else in her ?

Valentine of course knew Champion's reputation. The world of the theatre is a whispering gallery, through which sound forever complicated murmurs of scandal mingled with complicated murmurs of truths sometimes terrible. Every well-known actor and actress, every prominent manager and producer, is watched, considered, summed up, labelled. Champion was known for what he was, a persistent hunter of women, one who had often used his position to subdue. There are so many pretty women in London who want to "get on", and who are ready to "make sacrifices" in order to achieve the aims of their ambitions. Champion had often profited by sacrifices of such women. And "everyone" knew it. For Mrs. Champion not only had a jealous nature but also an unbridled tongue. And for years she had talked freely to all manner of "friends" about her wrongs and her miseries. The last liaison of Champion had been with Maud Eden. Valentine of course had heard of it. But Maud Eden hadn't been a success at the Central Theatre and she had been very difficult to deal with. And though a difficult success may be endured by a manager for reasons of money, a difficult failure soon fatigues the most patient. Valentine quite understood why Champion was sick of Miss Eden. But there were certain other matters which she didn't fully understand. For instance she was rather surprised by the warmth of Mrs. Champion's welcome of her on her return to Champion's management. Was that due merely to pre-occupation about the box office ? And then this invitation to stay in Park Lane ! What was the cause which had prompted that ? Surely Mrs. Champion, given her nature, wouldn't welcome any actress whom she suspected of being attractive to her husband ? And yet Valentine for a long time had been haunted by a fancy, which at times seemed more than a fancy, seemed to be an awareness, that Champion liked her very much, had even liked her very much under irritation, under absolute anger, when she had been "playing the devil"—as he had often called it—in the Central Theatre during the period of her success there.

Did Champion love anything in her beside her gift, the gift by which he stood to profit in the future ? She hoped not. For something in her was very weary of desire just

then. As she had the instinct to strip her life of material luxuries, and to return, not to poverty—she hated that, and would always hate it, she believed—but to a simplicity perhaps almost ascetic, so also she had the instinct to strip her life of desire, of lust, of all the longings in which the flesh has a part.

Trever had taught her so much of disgust. He had muddied for her the clear waters of her life. He had put into her, though perhaps she wasn't fully conscious of it, fear—fear of a sex.

And she was in a quite exceptional condition of mind. For she had just emerged from a long period of imprisonment. Her own feeling was that she needed, actually needed, a certain bareness of the innermost life—white walls without pictures on them, a room full of stillness, some empty hours in the day, passions expelled, driven far away into the distance beyond even the echoes.

And yet, contradictorily, she needed hard work.

At the end of April her mother and she turned out of the bungalow, and she went up to London. She had ordered rooms at Tatford's Hotel in Bloomsbury, and she drove there to leave her luggage. The landlady, Mrs. Tatford, Christian name Amelia, welcomed the distinguished wanderer from the Tatford fold with enthusiasm. Valentine had asked for a sitting-room. She had it; a room looking out on the noisy street, with a square centre table covered with a crinkly, fringed cloth of bright mustard colour, a chiffonier, two easy chairs of moulting leather, a "whatnot", a "settee", two Marcus Stone sentimentalities. On a sideboard reigned a large biscuit tin making a vain pretence to be silver.

This wasn't quite the bareness, the stripped asceticism, that something in Valentine longed for. With a faint shudder, she remembered theatrical lodgings in the provinces, in Wigan, in Preston, in Leeds, in Whitehaven even. But she was cordial to the smiling Amelia. And then she went to see her solicitor.

The valuation of the contents of the house in Wilton Crescent had been made. It amounted to no less than six thousand pounds including everything. A famous painter, who had immensely admired Valentine's performance in Dale's play, had given her two of his pictures. The price they were likely to fetch had swelled the total by a very large sum. And then there were three portraits of Valentine by other well

known painters, one of them the portrait showing her in the black and lacquer red room, the contents of which were included with the contents of the house.

Her first thought on hearing what the solicitor had to say was :

" If everything is sold, and I get rid of the lease, I can pay off my debt to Champion at once."

And with that thought came to her a great sense of relief.

From the solicitor's office she took a 'bus to her house agent. There she learnt that there would certainly be no difficulty in getting rid of the house. Now that a board was up there many enquiries were being made about it. A premium of fifteen hundred pounds was being asked of prospective purchasers. A well-known man on the Stock Exchange was very keen to have the house, but he was fighting the premium. He declared that he wouldn't give more than a thousand.

" Oh, let him have it for that ! " Valentine exclaimed.

But the house agent was certain they would get fifteen hundred with a little more bargaining.

" Anyhow don't lose him because of five hundred pounds ! "

" It will be all right. You can trust us to protect your interests, madam."

" He won't take the furniture and effects, I suppose ? " she asked.

" I'm afraid not, r. adam."

" Then I must have a sale."

As she went out of the office she thought, not without irony, of the almost brutal change which circumstance—was it?—had brought about in her. The passion for acquirement had given way to an overmastering desire to be free of possessions. She had a feeling almost of hatred for her " things." She didn't want to be like Carrie, and all the other Carries of this world.

From the house agents she walked to Westminster Cathedral.

She stayed there a long time.

CHAPTER XLV

ON the sixth of May Dale was in London again. He reached Victoria about five o'clock, got his luggage and drove to his house. But he kept the cab, and after a very short stay, and a talk with the Macfarlanes, who welcomed him with enthusiasm, he went back to the cab and drove to Wilton Crescent. After his long stay abroad he felt that he must see Valentine at once. No doubt he would find her in London.

When he reached her house and looked out of the cab window he saw a board announcing that the house was to be let unfurnished. He saw, too, that the windows were shuttered. Evidently she wasn't here. He was disappointed, chilled. But he got out and rang the bell.

After a time he heard the rattle of a chain, then the sound of a bolt being drawn and a click. The door was opened and a dark soldierly man with a red face showed himself.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miss Morris isn't here?"

"No, sir. I'm the caretaker. The house is up for sale."

"Sale! The advertisement says it's to let furnished."

"Well, sir, the owner wants to get rid of the lease. And the contents are all to be sold."

"Oh! I'm a friend of Miss Morris's. Is she in London?"

"Yes, sir. She's staying at Tatford's Hotel in Gower Street."

"Is she there now?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Thank you."

Dale gave the man half a crown. Then he stepped back and looked up at the board, noting the name and address of the house agents.

"Good evening," he then said to the caretaker.

"Thank you, sir, very much. Good evening, sir."

"Tatford's Hotel, Gower Street," Dale said to the cabman.

As the man drove away Dale looked once more at the big white board against the house front.

"I'll take over the lease," he said to himself.

And, perhaps for the first time, he realised intimately and revelled in the power of money. His play was doing splendid

business in America. He had money to "burn." Valentine was evidently, though for the moment only, on the rocks. Now was the time to prove his loyalty, as a friend if not as a lover. And he was tired of Chelsea, very tired of Tedworth Square. He would take over Valentine's house, the house which her first great success had brought her, the house she had chosen. And then if she—but he stopped short there. He didn't dare even to imagine that happiness with intimacy.

And so she had gone back to Tatford's Hotel! He remembered how he had called there to take her to the Central Theatre on that fateful day when, almost unknown, and quite unsuccessful, she had submitted herself to inspection, when she had had her first passage at arms with Champion. That seemed long ago. Dale knew why. It was because he had felt so much in the interval of time which had elapsed. And now he was once more driving to Tatford's Hotel to see her, and she was once more going to act in a play written by him. But she had escaped out of bondage and her little boy was dead. Life had changed her. And how much had it changed her? He wondered how she would look, how she would be with him, what she would say, what they would talk of, how their talk would be, how intimate, or how—but no, it could never be formal, talk between him and Valentine.

The cab drew up before Tatford's.

"Is Miss Morris in?"

A maid, elaborate but somehow all wrong, replied in a sweetly genteel voice that Miss Morris was not in London. She had left that day, "for Birmingham, I believe."

Birmingham! That was where Father Bexland lived.

"Can you tell me when she's likely to come back?"

"Miss Morris has gone for a couple of nights, I believe."

"Oh."

Dale stood for a moment. Then he said:

"Thanks."

"Any message?"

"No, thanks."

He turned away. For a moment he thought of going to the Central Theatre. But he decided against that. He didn't know exactly why. Instead he went to the Garrick Club.

On the following day soon after ten he went to the house agent whose name and address he had memorised, and

inquired whether Valentine's house was still in the market. The very smart young man who represented the firm replied to this question by another.

"Are you desirous of taking over the lease, sir, or do you only want to take the house for a shorter period?"

"I should be willing to take over the lease, I think. How many years has it still to run?"

"Twenty-one years, sir."

"That would be all right. I know the house well. It would suit me in every way. So the house is free?"

"Well, sir, somebody is after it, very much after it, I may say. But there's a slight hitch. The owner is asking a premium of fifteen hundred pounds, and the client in question refuses to give more than a thousand. Miss Morris—it's the house of Miss Morris, the well-known actress——"

"I know it is."

"Miss Morris has left the matter in our hands."

He cast an appraising glance out of his small brown eyes at Dale.

"We shall stand out for a fifteen hundred pounds premium. The house is well worth it."

"I'll give it you. And now about the lease."

The young man went into details to which Dale scarcely listened.

"That's all right. I want the house. I'll give you your terms. You haven't made any promise to the other fellow?"

"No, sir. But he thinks he is going to have the house."

"Tell him he's wrong. I'll go to my banker's and my broker's at once and make arrangements about paying the money."

"In that case, sir, I have no doubt that we shall be able to let you take the house over. The gentleman we are in treaty with is what we call a champion haggler."

"Send him to haggle somewhere else. You'll have no difficulty with me. Here's my card."

Dale laid the card down and went out of the office. From the office he drove to the City, where he interviewed his banker and his broker. When he had finished with them he walked for a few minutes westwards through the crowded ways of the City. There was surely something else he had to do, something in connection with Valentine, but for the moment he couldn't recall what it was. And he walked on

absorbed, searching his mind. And then suddenly the red face of a soldierly looking man came up before him. Ah, the caretaker of Valentine's house! He had stated that he contents of the house were to be sold. But why should there be a public sale? Why shouldn't the purchaser of the lease take over the contents of the house with the building? Dale had a feeling of recklessness about money now. He was thinking only of Valentine and of what he could do for her. A strong excitement had got a grip of him. He felt tumultuous. And he felt in a terrible hurry. "Get on! Get on! Don't let the grass grow under your feet! You know what you want to do. Do it! Don't count the cost!" He had money, and money was pouring in to his account every week from America. What did a few thousands matter to him? He would sell out some investments. He would sell some of the effects in his house in Tedworth Square. He hadn't made any great change in his life since success had come to him. He hadn't spent with both hands as Valentine had. Now he was glad of that, was thankful for that. For he was comparatively rich while she was in straits for money. He had the power to come to her rescue. He rejoiced in a feeling of power—power for her.

He drove to the office of his solicitor, who also acted for Valentine, and for most of the well-known playwrights and stage people of London. There he would surely be able to gather information about the proposed sale of Valentine's furniture, pictures and pretty things.

He had a long interview with the solicitor, and eventually arranged to buy Valentine's belongings *en bloc* for the price fixed by the valuer, six thousand pounds. Then he went home.

That evening after dinner he sat down in his library to write a letter to Valentine. He was feeling violently excited, restless, heated in body and mind. His body and mind seemed to him to be racing, to be travelling at racing speed though he was sitting still in his chair. He felt more alive than he had ever felt before.

And yet he couldn't write that letter. He had, perhaps, too much to deliver his mind and heart of. And so he was paralysed. He held the pen but no words came on the sheet of white letter paper. At last he put the pen down.

"No, I must see her. I must speak to her. Writing is too cold, too impersonal."

He couldn't write to her. To-morrow, if she came back from Birmingham, he would manage to see her.

What was she doing in Birmingham? He felt sure she had gone there to see Father Bexland. Why? All that part of her life, the part connected with religion, was hidden from Dale. She had let him into her stage life. She had allowed him to see a little way into her life with Mark Trever. But she had never spoken to him intimately about the religious side of her life. Only through another had he learnt of her visits to the Oratory. Mrs. Sartoris had told him about them. Certainly Valentine had told him of her affection for Father Bexland. But that was all.

She knew how to keep silence. There was something remote in her. Would she ever allow him to draw near to it, to come close to it, to understand it fully? Probably not.

He realised that though she often seemed to be startlingly unreserved there was much reserve in her. He wondered whether Father Bexland knew her much better than anyone else did. And, wondering, for a moment he felt jealous of Father Bexland, jealous of the power of the priest, jealous of the intimacy of the woman with the priest, jealous almost of a religion.

Two nights had passed since Dale's arrival in London. Towards the evening of his second full day in London he telephoned to Tatford's Hotel to ask if Valentine had come back from Birmingham. The reply disappointed him. She hadn't come back, and had telegraphed to say that she was staying on in Birmingham, and wouldn't be in London till the following Monday.

The following Monday—and it was now only Thursday.

Dale enquired through the telephone where she was staying in Birmingham, and was told that she was at the Midland Hotel.

He made up his mind that he would go to Birmingham on the following day. He went up to his bedroom and packed a suit-case without saying anything to Macfarlane. The short process of packing seemed to relieve his mind. He went to bed early. He was in such a hurry for the morrow that he wanted to sleep at once. But of course he couldn't sleep. It was past midnight when he got out of bed to take a pillule of "Dial." Sleep came to him about half-past twelve.

Macfarlane woke him up in the morning at eight o'clock

and brought him a cup of tea. When he had gone up to bed Dale had brought the surreptitiously packed suit-case from his bath-room, where he had put it, into his bedroom, and placed it on the floor near his wardrobe.

"Your tea, sir!" said Macfarlane.

Dale's eyes fell on the suit-case.

"Oh—yes. Good morning, Macfarlane."

"Good morning, sir."

Dale saw Macfarlane gazing at the suit-case.

"I packed that yesterday."

"Yes, sir? You are leaving, sir?"

Macfarlane looked and sounded very much surprised.

"I thought of going to Birmingham to-day. But I'm not quite sure. I'll tell you later."

"Yes, sir."

And Macfarlane, after another searching glance at the suit-case, which he hadn't packed, retired to the bath-room.

Not quite sure! The coming of the London morning, fairly bright for England, but very pale and furtive compared with the radiant, bold mornings of Egypt, had changed Dale's mind. He still wanted to go to Birmingham. But now he felt doubtful of his welcome there. In such a vitally important phase of his life he must take care not to blunder. Perhaps if he went Valentine wouldn't want him in Birmingham. He mustn't pursue her, mustn't be indelicate. He wasn't a Champion. There was nothing rough shod about him.

"I know what I'll do!" he said to himself, getting out of bed. "I'll wire and ask her if I may come."

And directly after breakfast he wired, paying a reply. The answer caused him to feel glad that he hadn't yielded to the impulse which had made him pack the suit-case.

"Very glad you are in London but do not come here shall be back on Monday come in any time on that evening loving greetings—Valentine."

With a feeling of humiliation Dale unpacked the suit-case.

The heat and the hurry were abated in him. Nevertheless he had things to do in London for her. During the remainder of the week he was much in the City. He had to sell out some investments in order to accumulate enough money to pay for the contents of her house. By the Saturday this was done.

During the following week he hoped to enter into possession. Then he must get rid of his own house. He had no intention of playing the heroic lover, of going to Valentine and saying, "I have saved you. Take back your home as a gift from me." No. She needed the money. Through him she would get it. But there would be no question of a gift to hurt her pride. He would simply have bought a charming house, delightfully furnished. And he would of course go to live in it. What happened afterwards depended on her.

He had taken the precaution of asking his solicitor and the house agent not to let Valentine know about his negotiations for the lease and the buying of her effects in the house.

"Miss Morris is a great friend of mine," he had said. "I'll tell her myself that I am the purchaser. I think she'll be glad that her house is going into the hands of a friend and that it won't be stripped of its contents, but will remain just as it was when she lived in it."

The solicitor "quite understood." The house agent said, "certainly. But if Miss Morris makes inquiries what are we to say?"

"Can't you tell her that you are almost sure of getting rid of the house on terms that will satisfy her within a few days?"

The house agent thought that would be all right.

"You want to give Miss Morris a little surprise?" he said, sympathetically.

"Exactly! A little surprise!"

When Monday evening came Dale set off in good time on his way to Bloomsbury. He didn't take a cab. It was a fine evening, full of the English spirit of spring, and he resolved to walk. He wanted to get himself well in hand. He had the feeling that this was an evening of fate for him. He also had the feeling that what happened between him and Valentine would depend greatly upon himself. She was a highly sensitive being. He knew that. She noticed, perhaps was influenced by, very small things. Nuances were important in her eyes. She didn't miss much that was manifest in the human beings she was brought into contact with. Even where she loved she was almost terribly clear-sighted.

"If I have any chance at all I mustn't spoil it," Dale thought.

And a nervous feeling that he hated tried to take possession of him. But he fought against it. He must be self-possessed

to-night. Women were always impressed by self-possession in men. Shrinking sensitiveness in the male being didn't appeal to them. In love matters especially a man must be bold to have success. And there was an unusual boldness in Valentine. She had shown him more than once that she had moral courage, on which she could draw in difficult moments. She must have escaped from Mark Trever and Carrie Geean only because she had that. And what she had, and was aware of having, she mustn't miss in him.

He walked rapidly, absorbed in his thoughts, forming resolutions, feeling fatalistic, and yet paradoxically feeling at the same time that he had the power, if his courage didn't fail him, to fashion his own fate.

As he drew near to Tatford's Hotel the past swept upon him like a wave. For a moment her success was abolished; her present fame as an actress wasn't, had never been; he was coming into Bloomsbury to take her by the hand, to lead her from obscurity to the blaze that men call glory. He had found her. He had lost her. Now he would find her again. And surely—surely—he would keep her, he would be able to keep her.

Tatford's Hotel—again!

He went up the two steps. The front door was wide open. In the mild spring evening the hotel had an unbuttoned, unbraced air, as if greeting the spring in its shirt-sleeves. Through an open window on the right, above the area railing, he saw a cap with black cherries, yes, actually a cap, on the head of an elderly lady who appeared to be busily engaged with a cup of—yes, it must be—cocoa. A young man, who looked like a clerk, was smoking a cigarette at the front door. Dale noticed that he wore in his striped blue and white tie a brass fox as a tie-pin. As Dale pushed the bell this young man eyed him curiously and said:

"Fine evening, isn't it?"

"Yes, very fine. I hope it'll last."

"So does everyone," said the young man.

And he fingered his fox.

The gentel maid came, sweetly elaborate and all wrong somehow.

"Has Miss Morris come back?" asked Dale.

"Yes. She arrived this afternoon."

"Can I see her? She's expecting me."

The young man stared. The maid took Dale's card. What

a roar there was in the street ! The May evening was full of strange roaring noises.

" I'll go see ! " said the maid.

She disappeared sweetly, elaborately. The cap with black cherries showed itself at the window on the right of the door. It protruded for a moment into the outer air, and a pair of old scrutinising eyes took toll of Dale. Then the cap was withdrawn.

" Looks like keeping fine," said the young man, lighting a fresh cigarette.

" I hope it will."

" You know Miss Morris ! She's a deuced fine actress. I saw her in that play of Constantine's. That *was* a play if you like ! "

" Indeed it was."

" Miss Morris begs you will walk up," said the maid, faintly writhing, as if in an endeavour to creep into ladyhood.

" Will you kindly come this way ? "

Dale passed through the buff-coloured hall, and mounted a flight of stairs behind the maid's intensely self-conscious back.

" This way, please."

They had gained the first floor. She undulated to the left, tapped on a door and immediately opened it.

" The gentleman ! " she observed.

And there was Valentine standing by a round table covered with a mustard-coloured, heavily-fringed cloth, and smiling, with the irresponsible look in her large nut-brown eyes which Dale knew so well. She held out a long hand, and, as the maid squirmed out and closed the door, she said :

" So you're a gentleman ! And she calls me ' the lady ' ! This is the very temple of gentility. We are all ladies and gentlemen here. Isn't it wonderful ? "

" But why are you here ? Dear—dear Valentine ! "

He put out his other hand, and she let him take her left hand and hold it while roaring noises came in to them from the street.

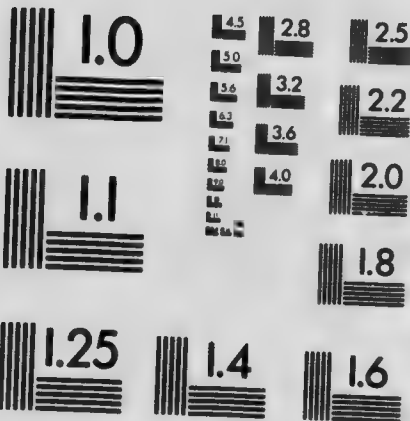
" I'm here because I'm stony broke, Martin. The glory has departed from me. I'm giving up my house. I'm trying to sell everything in it. I'm poverty stricken and I have debts. That's how it is."

She glanced round the room ; there was still a faint look of irresponsible humour in her eyes.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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"What shall we sit on? The settee? Yes, let us sit there and try to be natural on it. And I'll push the window a little. Gower Street is so vociferous. All the traffic seems to be welcoming the spring to-night. Why aren't we in a wood or in a garden? But what does it matter? What do the surroundings matter?"

She nearly shut the window.

"You can say that!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, now. I cared too much about surroundings. And I had a horrible mania for *things*. But that's over now. I've changed a good deal since you've been away, Martin."

She sat down on the settee. Dale sat down by her and looked at her steadily.

"Yes, you have changed," he said.

And there was a note of anxiety in his voice.

"How could it be otherwise, Martin? I've lost Brian and I've escaped from a long imprisonment."

"Yes; I know."

"I'm outside now. I shall never go back to that prison."

"To that prison! What do you mean? You're surely not——"

He stopped. She moved her shoulders. All the irresponsible humour had died away from her eyes. She looked grave, even sad, like a woman with a burden laid upon her, he thought.

"Aren't you free now?" he asked.

"What is freedom? Is it anything more than an idea? We struggle after it, some of us. We talk grandiloquently of breaking our bonds. But can we ever break them? Are we meant to be free? Isn't it our insolence, the insolence in us, which clamours and strives after freedom? Wouldn't it be far more fine on our part if we learnt to submit ourselves, to be humble? In any case, Martin, whether we wish it or not, we often are forced to submit. I have had to submit to the loss of my little boy. That sorrow is laid upon me. I cannot avoid it. I wish to bear it simply, uncomplainingly. I can't welcome it. Those who can welcome their sorrows are much farther advanced than I am now, perhaps than I ever shall be. But I am not going to rebel. I didn't want Brian to come. But he came. And then I didn't want him to go. But he went. My wishes have no power. It doesn't matter—

what I wish. It doesn't matter at all, Martin. It has taken me years to realise that very simple thing. But now I have realised it."

"You say it doesn't matter what you wish. But I say it does, it must matter to *you*. Sometimes I think we live by desire, that the vitality in us lies in the perpetual activity of our desires. I'm full of desires. I know that. And if I didn't desire I should be nothing. And you used to be so—yes, you are changed."

There was, and he was beginning to know it, something in this change that alarmed Dale. There was a gentleness in Valentine that was touching, that touched him. And yet somehow, subtly, it made him suspicious. Of what? He asked himself that. He enquired of himself. But the answer so it seemed, wasn't within him. He didn't feel that she was a stranger, that he had come back and had found in his friend, in the woman he loved, a stranger. Rather he felt that she was his Valentine withdrawn, more remote from him, perhaps even from everyone, than she had been before. And it was surely that remoteness which roused in him anxiety, fear almost. He had gone eagerly, intending—hadn't he—to speak of the immediate future, perhaps to tell her what he was doing for her, not in a spirit of pride or in expectation of gratitude, but as friend communicates with friend, speaks openly, intimately of the things which concern them both. But now something prohibited him. How could he speak to this quiet, watchful woman, sad but with a sadness that accepted, of the taking over of a lease, of the buying of pictures and furniture, of the preparation of a new play? But neither could he speak of little Brian. She had spoken so simply and openly of little Brian that he couldn't speak of him at all. There was nothing in her that claimed his sympathy. There lay his difficulty. And as to the break with Mark Trever, now that Dale was with Valentine he felt that Trever had not merely passed out of her life but as if Trever had never had any power over the real Valentine, the Valentine of the depths.

But something had power over that Valentine. He felt that, knew that, and was faintly, vaguely afraid and uneasy.

"But I don't think you are changed," she said. "You are the same old Martin."

"D'you mean that as a rebuke or as a compliment?"

"You and I don't pay each other compliments. If we did we shouldn't be friends. And how could I rebuke the best friend I have?"

"Most people think it's impossible for a man and a woman, who are both of them young and normal, to be friends—only friends," Dale said.

"Aren't we friends? Don't you feel I'm your friend?"

"I don't think I want you to be too much my friend," he said.

And to his own surprise he was struck by a sound of irritability which came into his voice.

"When you talk of friendship like that it seems to put me at a distance," he added.

"Don't be cross, Martin," she said gently.

Why was she so gentle with him? He wondered whether this new gentleness was bred in her by sorrow, or by something more subtle, more dangerous to him, than sorrow.

"I believe," he said, fixing his observant eyes on her in a look that was nearly hard. "I believe you class us all in the one category. I believe that to you now we all seem just clawing males. D'you remember?"

"Clawing males! Yes, I said that to you."

"I hate that expression if it includes me."

The irritability he had noticed in his own voice was now lost in a painful emotion which he tried to control but couldn't.

"D'you see even love as a thing with claws?" he added.

"Not every kind of love."

"Not mine, I hope," he said, sternly.

"I wasn't thinking about you just then," she said.

It was a cruel thing to say, but she said it so simply and sincerely that Dale didn't feel any intentional cruelty in it. He had always felt that Valentine was essentially sincere. But he had never felt so certain of her sincerity as he did now. How to face this sincerity, what to do with it, how to deal with it—that was his problem.

"Then what were you thinking about?" he asked.

"I can't tell you," she said, in a low voice, looking down.

Dale got up and walked across the room to the window. It was slightly open. He pulled it a little more open and looked out. He listened to the voices of Bloomsbury.

"Why did I come to see her here?" he said to himself.

"I can't be myself here. I can't even think properly. My

thoughts are all disconnected. If we were only in my house, in my quiet room ! ”

He turned round, pushing the window.

“ You can’t stay on here,” he said.

“ Why not ? ”

“ All that noise outside ! It’s intolerable. One can’t think in it.”

He looked at the walls, at the room.

“ Those engravings ! This tablecloth ! Everything’s all wrong. But of course you are only here till——”

“ I have debts to pay, heavy debts.”

“ You’ll soon work those off when you’re acting again.”

“ Not soon. I have one very big debt.”

“ I know. I met Miss Geean at Monte Carlo.”

“ She told you ? ”

“ Yes ; about the debt to her which Champion has paid for you.”

“ He paid it to save me from being sued for breach of contract. Now I have to pay him. I want very much to be free of that debt.”

“ You do ? ”

He was staring at her now.

“ Yes, of course ! ”

“ Well, Valentine, if that is so, if that particular debt weighs on you more than the others, you can get rid of it almost directly.”

“ How ? I’m going to pay it back gradually out of my salary. It will take me many months to work it off.”

“ It needn’t.”

“ Why not ? ”

He hesitated for a moment. Then he decided to tell her. Why should he keep it back ? She must know, whether he spoke now or not, in a very few days.

“ It needn’t because I’m buying the contents of your house. The matter will go through almost directly. Then, if you wish, you can settle with Champion at once.”

She got up from the settee. For a moment she looked like the girl in the managers’ room at the Central Theatre, to whom Champion had said : “ I’m pretty tough, I believe, but you knocked me out, and I’m bound to say so.” Dale thought she was going to cry. But she didn’t. She just stood and looked at him, and then she said :

“ Oh, Martin dear ! ”

"You've got some jolly things. If you must part from them——"

"Martin, you are a friend! This is friendship, the truest friendship! But you mustn't. I can't let you!"

"Why not? I'm taking over the lease of your house——"

"The house too!"

"Yes. I'm sick of Tedworth Square. I've been meaning to move for a long time. My play's making a lot of money in America. I haven't been extravagant since I've had success."

"As I have! As I have!"

"I'm taking your house and I'm going to live in it."

He forced himself to smile.

"I'm buying you out. There's nothing to be grateful about. I get a charming house beautifully furnished for my money. And I get it for what I'm told is a perfectly reasonable price."

"Don't think you can trick me, Martin!"

"Where is the trickery? Isn't what I say absolutely true?"

"You are doing it all for *me*. But I oughtn't to accept this great benefit."

"I deny that it's a benefit. I'm not a loser in this. I gain. I like your house far better than I like mine. I always have."

"Martin! Martin!"

"And anyhow," he exclaimed, reddening all over his face.

"You let Champion pay your debt to Miss Geean!"

Before he said that he knew that he was going to say something he didn't wish to say, something he hated. And yet he couldn't prevent himself from saying it.

"So why shouldn't I——"

And then he stopped. He couldn't go on. He loathed himself and his jealousy too much to go on, to finish the sentence. His face burned. He felt as if his eyes were burning too. And he looked down.

"I've spoilt it all! I'm a beast. I've spoilt the whole thing," he said to himself.

Intense misery invaded him.

"I'm sorry, Valentine," he said, still looking down. "I wanted to be a good friend to you. But it's no use my making a pretence of friendship. The fact is I love you, and not at all in a friend's way. All this that I'm doing is done out of

pure selfishness probably. I don't believe I thought that till now. But now I believe it's all selfishness, the selfishness of my love. It's very difficult to be disinterested. It's no use my pretending that I am. I've given myself away. But anyhow I hope you'll let the thing go through and settle with Champion at once. I don't like your being in his debt—though of course it's no business of mine. And please try to forgive me for what I said just now, that beastly spoiling thing I said."

And then, before Valentine could say or do anything, he was at the door, opened it, and went out quickly shutting it behind him. He hurried down the stairs.

"Hulloh!" said the young man, who looked like a clerk, and who was still smoking at the front door. "Good-night!"

But Dale didn't answer, although he heard.

He caught a last glimpse of a pair of old scrutinising eyes under some bobbing black cherries as he plunged into the traffic of Gower Street.

CHAPTER XLVI

DALE went home that night obsessed by a feeling of catastrophe. He was afraid of himself as well as disgusted by himself. He had wanted to ask Valentine to come back to her home, to take it back from him with all that was in it, to live in it once more but with him, as his wife. Now he felt that he could never do that. He felt morally ugly and hopelessly unworthy of Valentine. And yet how natural his impulsive outburst of jealousy had been. But he hadn't wished to be natural just then. He had wished to be finer, more noble, than it was in his nature to be. He was horribly distressed at this revelation of himself to himself.—and of course to her. But it was the revelation to himself which hurt him most sharply.

On the following morning Macfarlane brought him a letter which had just been given in by a boy messenger. On the envelope he saw Valentine's big handwriting.

" Please tell the boy to wait," he said.

" Very well, sir."

Dale was sitting at the breakfast table ; when Macfarlane had gone out of the room he hesitated to open the letter. Valentine must have been startled and disgusted by his outburst. " Anyhow you let Champion pay your debt to Macfarlane so why shouldn't I pay your debt to Champion ? " Dale had stopped short ; he hadn't completed the sentence ; but of course her mind had completed it. How coarse, how brutally indelicate he had been—or the low creature whom he housed within him had been. And she was so sensitive and so proud. Yes, in spite of her extraordinary subjugation to Trevor she was proud. Dale hesitated with the letter in his hand. He was afraid of being castigated for what he had done. He was even afraid of being told that he had broken her friendship for him by his ugliness. She was impetuous. Perhaps in this letter, sent so early, written probably in the night, she rejected all he was doing for her, cast him away. The thing done must be much less valued by her than the spirit in which it was done. And since last night she must see the spirit as a vulgar, common grotesque, expressed by the twisted mask of the clawing male.

At last he opened the letter.

" DEAR MARTIN,

" I will accept this great kindness from you. And I will pay my debt to Champion at once : that will be such a great relief to me. You cannot imagine, I believe, what a relief it will be. I was going to work off that great debt—it was five thousand pounds—by degrees out of my salary, paying so much each week. Now I can pay in one sum before I begin to work. How thoughtful and dear you are.

" VALENTINE."

As Dale looked at the last sentence he felt that tears came into his eyes. The fact that she had ignored, had been able to ignore his coarse outburst, touched his most intimate spirit. She must have overcome something in herself to be able to accept his doing for her with such simplicity. He knew that because he knew what her pride was. There was even a sweetness in her acceptance, in the simplicity of it. She had done a difficult thing as if it were easy to do. For, often, it is far more difficult to receive than it is to give.

His misery was suddenly changed into happiness. The dullness in him was pushed aside by a leaping vitality. Acting on a strong impulse he wrote an ardent letter to Valentine, telling her how thankful he was to be allowed to do something for her, how wretched he had been before he read her letter. He would carry through all the necessary business connected with the house as quickly as possible, and directly the house was his he would pay a cheque to her through her solicitor.

"And then, thank God," he wrote, "you'll be clear with Champion. I can't bear your being under an obligation to him. There's suffocation for me in the thought of that. Don't think me a fool. I can't help it. Valentine dear, be careful with Champion."

Just as he was going to put his letter into an envelope Dale hesitated, looking at those last words. Were they dangerous?

Would she resent them? Would it be wise to strike them out? Probably it would. But if so impulse and wisdom were at odds within him just then and impulse carried the day. He didn't alter the letter.

Perhaps she needed his warning. But even if she did was she the woman to heed any warning?

Dale was afraid of Champion.

He hadn't seen Champion since his return to England, but now he felt that if he didn't pay a visit to the theatre Champion would think it odd, might even think that Dale was deliberately avoiding him. That wouldn't do. They had work to get through together in the immediate future. A speedy meeting was inevitable. Better to get it over at once.

Dale telephoned to the theatre and asked for an appointment. Champion replied asking him to come to dinner in Park Lane on the following night. "Only ourselves and, if I can get her, Miss Morris. We can have a good talk about the play after dinner, just cosily over a cigar. I want to get ahead with it at once."

Dale accepted this invitation, and went to Park Lane wondering whether Valentine would be there.

She was there. He found her in the ornate drawing-room when he walked into it, standing in a very plain, and probably quite cheap, black dress among the glories collected by Mrs. Champion, talking with her host and hostess. And as his eyes rested on her he thought how extraordinary it was that she

came from Tatford's into this gaudiness, and that presently she would leave it and go back to sleep at Tatford's.

It was at once evident to Dale that Mrs. Champion had completely changed towards Valentine. She was now at Valentine's feet, was all sweetness, flattery and compliments. As usual she overdid things, being no artist in the conduct of life, being moreover incurably vulgar in the smoothly genteel way of vulgarity. She kept Dale, and no doubt Valentine, secretly writhing with her modishness, her ineffable airs and swimming success. But her persistent intention to be charming was obvious, and she seemed to be for once at one with her husband in her delight at the wanderer's return to his fold. She wore, Dale noted, a string of black pearls.

Champion looked prosperous, powerful, very large. He had a masterful air of prosperity, and seemed to be in a jovial even an excited mood. He greeted Dale with loud geniality and exclaimed :

"Glad to see you back, boy. We've been wanting you badly. There's work ahead of us. The play's going to come out of its pigeon-hole at last and show the B.P. its feathers. We want to produce in August, before the rest of the autumn pieces get going. We'll have six weeks rehearsals, not a day more for fear of them all going stale. We're in May now, we've got plenty of time. But before rehearsals begin we must go through the play carefully, and settle about scenery and effects. I'm not going to leave anything to chance this time. We've got Miss Morris here back at last, and sooner than we expected, eh! Now we'll show London something that'll make it sit up."

There was a triumphant sound in his resolute voice, and when they were at dinner he continued to be very expansive and jovial, while Mrs. Champion was sugar-sweet and charming. Dale was rather overwhelmed by this double, though different, cordiality. Something in Champion made him feel small, and short but small. He was conscious of possessing good brains and also a marked and undeniable gift. He was certain that Champion understood and valued this gift. But he believed that nevertheless something in Champion looked down on him, thought him of little account, believed that he could be swept aside with brutality when sweeping aside seemed indicated, and that his sensitiveness rendered him essentially negligible. In consequence of this belief he wasn't at his ease with

Champion. A painful self-consciousness took possession of him. He even felt self-conscious and uncomfortable in connection with Valentine, who nevertheless was his "sort" surely, and not at all Champion's "sort." But he tried, and he hoped successfully, to hide his lack of self-confidence and self-possession, took his share in the talk with a simulation of boldness, and even made an effort to be hearty and offhand in manner.

Valentine looked haggard and sad, but, he thought, beautiful and more refined than she had ever looked before. Certainly she didn't suffer from self-consciousness. Her native authority saved her from that. She was too careless of effect to make an effort such as Dale was perpetually conscious of making. There was nothing of the actress in her to-night. She was simple, rather quiet, curiously detached and aloof, without apparently being aware that she was so. Champion's enthusiasm about the play, his energy in suggestion for the future, his prevision of success, did not wake any strong echo in her. Champion and Dale did most of the talking, though Mrs. Champion was ever ready with the expressive smile and the flattering word.

When dinner was over Champion said:

"Dale and I'll stay in here and have a short confab while you two ladies hob-nob together. But we won't be more than five minutes."

Mrs. Champion raised a jewelled finger.

"Now, no naughty stories, you two! Don't corrupt my innocent husband, Mr. Dale!"

This was the type of remark that Dale loathed, and didn't know how to cope with. But he managed to raise a laugh and a promise. As Valentine went out of the room she turned her head and looked back for an instant. Dale, who was facing the door which Champion was holding open, wondered about this look, because it was, he thought, so peculiar. It seemed to sweep coldly over the gaudy dining-room, over the lights, the flowers and the silver, over the heavy velvet curtains, the thick, expensive carpet. It seemed to sum up, and then the large eyes rested for an instant on Dale and it was as if they said to him:

"And so this is success! I loathe it!"

Then she was gone, and Champion came up to him holding a gold cigar-box out in a big, determined hand.

"She's a strange creature, eh?"

"Miss Morris?"

"Val Morris—yes. Light up, boy. There's nobody like my wife's fallen for her in a wonderful way. She used to love her. Now she's all over her."

"Why's that?"

"Ask some other woman! But I suppose it's because she sees now what an actress like that means to the box office."

"Oh!" said Dale, feeling almost sure Champion had told him a lie.

"Have a glass of this port. You won't get a better in London."

"Thanks!"

Champion settled himself in his chair, and swelled out his enormous chest.

"And I've got her for five years, boy!" he said, blowing forth a cloud of smoke. "Five years to develop that talent of hers! Listen here!" (He laid a heavy hand on Dale's knee.) "At the end of them she'll have a reputation such as no English actress has had since Sarah Siddons. But it'll be greater than that. I'm going to make it a world reputation. If this play of yours turns out to be a modern *Dame Camélias*, as I believe it will, I'm going to take it all over the English-speaking world with her starring in it. What do you say to that? Money for you, eh?"

"But how can you leave the Central Theatre?"

"When I take her starring I'll let it. But not a word of this to my wife. You know what women are. And she's a regular type. Hands you out sugar plums one minute and drives a knife under your ribs the next. Not that I care. My ribs are as tough as an old sailing ship's, thank God. But I don't want any more fuss just now. Tell you the truth, we've had hell lately over Maud Eden. The older they get the more they're jealous. And my wife's at a critical age. For the moment it's smooth water, because she knows Val Morris can draw, and Val Morris coming into the theatre means Maud Eden getting the kick. But though I've stuffed her mouth lately with those pearls she's wearing to-night I don't trust her a yard. So keep your mug shut about the travelling."

At this point in the conversation Dale realised something that he hadn't suspected before: he realised that Champion had been drinking heavily. This strange incaution in a so cautious man proved it. Within a few minutes Champion told a lie, or half a truth, and had followed it on with a truth.

that showed it up. He would never have done this, Dale was sure, if he had been in full command of his faculties. Dale understood now Mrs. Champion's attitude towards Valentine. It was her jealous hatred of Maud Eden which had led to this ardent welcome of Maud Eden's rival. Undoubtedly Champion must have drunk as much as he could carry comfortably before the dinner began, and the addition of several glasses of champagne, and now of a bumper of port, had clouded his reason and rendered his mental faculties unstable.

"Of course I'll say nothing," Dale said.

"The longer my wife keeps friendly with Val Morris the better for all of us," said Champion. "I've settled with old Carrie Geean for Val."

"Miss Geean told me that when I met her at Monte Carlo."

"Oh, blabbed to you, did she? Not a word to my wife about that. If there's one thing she can't stand it's my spending money on 'em."

"Of course Miss Morris will pay you back," said Dale, stiffly.

Champion poured himself out another glass of port.

"In time, in time, boy! But five thousand pounds isn't paid off in a moment by a woman who's hard on the rocks. Val's got other debts besides the one to me and she hasn't got a bean at this moment. She let her house at Birchington. She's getting rid of the house in London, or trying to. And she's selling every blessed thing she's got."

"Then she'll soon have plenty of money."

"And blow it all in again! Women like that, born artists, are never any good as financiers."

"I suppose you'll pay her a good salary."

"As I intend to travel her I'm giving her more than I'd give any living actress whom I was going to keep in London. It isn't here, it's in America that I expect to get my money back hand over fist. I'll travel her in your play right through the States, from New York to the Golden Gate. I know what I'm doing, boy. I'm a business man, but for all that I can rise to the real thing in art. You may not know it, but ever since that rehearsal Val insisted on having at the Central—damned cheek it was of her too, but I forgive her for it because she knew her own value and I didn't then—ever since that rehearsal I've known she was a diamond of the very first water. I'm putting my money where I'll get it all back. But I'm

giving her the chance of a lifetime, too. So neither of us to grumble. Val and I we're going to work in together. She's got over hating me, boy. She's got over calling me Caliban. She's getting to know me. A woman like that, as proud as Lucifer—it is Lucifer, eh?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so."

"Lucifer—doesn't let a man fork out five thousand pounds for her if she don't mean to pay him back."

"Of course she'll pay you back."

"No, what I mean is if she don't feel something for him. Don't you care for that port?"

"It's excellent, but I've had enough, thank you."

"Well. I'll just have one more and then we'll join the ladies. You can take it from me, boy, that Val's changed his opinion of me. I'll allow I'm pretty tough at times. Didn't she give it all back to me during the run of your play? Didn't she?"

Again a heavy hand came down on Dale's knee and gripped it.

"I really don't know."

"Well, I do. Didn't she cut us, me and my wife, out of that party she gave? Didn't she?"

"If you say so."

"I do say so, boy. But that wasn't all. She labelled me Caliban. And if you'll believe me I'm known as Caliban to-day right through the theatrical profession. You hear?"

"Yes."

"And yet I've forgiven her, boy. I've overlooked it. I paid her back good for evil. She chucked me for Mark Truscott and Carrie and when she was down and out, when she had a bean and was on the kerb, as you might say, what did I do? What do I do?"

"Oh—well——"

"I take her back. I offer her a salary I've never offered before to anyone—I don't care who it is. I pay her debts and put her on her feet. Talk of the good Samaritan! By the way, he isn't in it with me. And she knows it, she knows it, she knows it. She called me Caliban but now she sees——"

"I say, don't you think Mrs. Champion will be wondering whether we are ever coming?"

"Let her wonder! She called me Caliban, boy, but——"

"Yes, but Miss Morris will be missing us too, don't you think?"

"Miss Morris? Val? Will she? By God, boy, you're right. I was forgetting."

He got to his feet.

"We'll just have a glass of old brandy and then——"

"No more for me, thanks!"

"What? You're a damned teetotaller, are you? Can't carry your liquor? Well, I can, thank the Lord! I've never been one to drink. But I can put away as much as any man in London without showing it."

He lifted his glass.

"That's the stuff! Now then, boy!"

He took Dale confidentially by the arm.

"Not a word to her of all I've been telling you, boy! Not a word to her! You and I—we're friends, pals. But there's no friendship with women. You've got to master 'em, boy. You've got to train 'em to it, and then it's all right. I know. You're a Joseph, boy. Anyone can see that. But I'm not. If Potiphar's wife had fallen for me, I shouldn't have bolted and left my combinations—no, that's not it, but you know what I mean, behind me. So not a word, boy! I've trusted you because you're my friend. But with a woman it's—well, here we are, ladies! I'm afraid we've been rather a long time, but we've been talking over business."

"And Miss Morris and I have been having a talk over you men. Haven't we, Miss Morris dear? She doesn't believe in you any more than I do. But we agree that we can't get along without you."

And Mrs. Champion opened her eyes very wide, and looked very young—or tried to—and conjured up an airy smile, and was fascinating and pink and intolerable. And Dale, glancing at Valentine, who was sitting on a deep sofa under a cloud of azaleas which blossomed in an enormous pot—it looked to him like a vat—of blue and white china, received a glance from her which frightened him. For there was in it something desperate, something even, he believed, fanatical, which suggested to him an underneath personality never fully seen by him until now.

When a buhl clock on the high marble mantelpiece struck the half-hour after ten Valentine got up resolutely to go. And in spite of the protests of her host and hostess she stuck to her resolve.

"I get tired rather easily just now," she said. "And I want to build up plenty of strength for what is in front of me."

"She's right!" exclaimed Champion.

He insisted upon ordering Mrs. Champion's "Rolls" to take Valentine home. When this was done he added:

"No more of that bacchante business now, eh Miss Morris? No more dancing till three and four o'clock in the morning!"

He fixed his excited eyes on her.

"We've got to be careful of you now. Looks mean a lot in the theatre. We'll take care of yours. From now on you belong to—" he stopped short, seemed to reconsider something, then finished—"to your art."

She said nothing.

"Ain't I right, eh?" he persisted, in a voice that matched his eyes.

She frowned, then lifted her narrow eyebrows.

"I suppose I ought to say yes, in order to fall in with your opinion of me. Am I an artist, Mr. Dale?"

She shrugged her shoulders and tightened her lips.

"Art! Art! Art! What is it? A simulation! An endeavour to escape out of life."

Her voice took on a darker shade.

"Too often a pretence that life crushes to powder—dust—drift dust."

"The car is at the door, sir."

"Will you see me home, Mr. Dale?"

CHAPTER XLVII

"D O turn out the light, will you, Martin?"

Dale touched the switch and the interior of Mrs. Champion's gaudy car faded into dimness. They were carried along almost silently through London in the direction of Bloomsbury. And they were silent. Once Dale heard Valentine sigh faintly. He glanced at her and saw her head turned away from him. She must be looking out of the window into the world of night. He felt that she was sad, and perhaps, exasperated. To him it had been an atrocious evening. And she, though much more

authoritative and capable of dominating a situation, was as sensitive as he was. Why had she tied herself up to Champion for five years? Champion's abrupt revelation of his plans for the future had startled and alarmed Dale, had alarmed him because he realised the under force of Champion, the coarse determination to carry things through which was surely the basis of his character. Champion had willed that Valentine should return to him and she had returned. He willed now that she should presently travel over the English world with him starring under his management. And that, too, would come about unless some strong intervention took place. But that intervention must come from without. Valentine, Dale believed, even seemed to know at this moment, would not resist Champion's decisions with regard to her future as an actress while she was under his management. Under all her authority, her wilfulness, there was something submissive. Dale was afraid of that trait in her, was especially afraid of it to-night.

"May I come in for a little while when we get to Tatford's?" he asked presently.

"Yes. Though I have a sitting-room it may shock the powers that be and the people with caps. But you may. Oh, Martin, dear, what a dreadful evening!"

And then they were silent again till the car, surely astonished, stopped before the yellow and brown façade of the Gower Street refuge. As they got out she said:

"This is awful, but do you know, Martin, I'm not sure that I don't prefer it to the suffocation of Park Lane. I've got a key. Follow me in."

A light was burning in the empty "lounge." The sound of a gramophone evicting "Down in the Forest" came to them from some moderately distant fastness.

"That's how they pass their time in the drawing-room!" she whispered. "Come along!"

When they were in the sitting-room he said:

"You can't stay on here much longer."

"No. I realise that now. I shall have to take some little hole where I can be private."

"Why a little hole? Why not something simple but pretty?"

"Why not? Why not? But something in me keeps saying 'Why? Why?'"

She lit a cigarette after giving him one.

"Simplicity, bareness, austerity! The Park Lane makes me long for that. And silence, peace, *awayness*. you know what I mean by awayness, Martin?"

"I believe I do. I had a feeling of it in Egypt. But was spoilt by something"

"What?"

"By your not being there with me."

After a rather long silence she said,

"You don't know exactly what I mean by awayness, Martin."

She had sat down near the window, which was partly open behind curtains covered with a pattern of pink convolvulus.

"Do you mean absolute solitude then?" he asked, sitting down by the table on a dining-room chair.

"Some people might call it that. I shouldn't."

"I believe you are thinking of—what shall I call it? solitude in religion," he said, a fear creeping suddenly at his heart.

"You are intuitive, Martin."

Dale was horribly full of fears to-night. Her answer seemed for a moment to set Champion and his determined intent at a distance. Till now Champion had stood up, had loomed up, a threatening figure in the foreground of Dale's mind. Now he faded and Dale saw a priest, Father Bexland. The eyes of Champion were sensual, determined, dissipated. The eyes of the priest were wonderfully sincere, kindly, steadfast. But now Dale feared their gaze, feared the darkness behind them, more even than he feared the nature—he did not choose to name it soul just then—behind Champion's. He felt himself to be a prince of cowards at that moment, his awareness of cowardice drove him to decision. His very fears spurred him to action. A swift thought pierced him.

"I'm like a terrified soldier going over the top before the word's given just to get it over."

He got up, went to Valentine and said:

"I don't believe you love me, Valentine. I know you are fond of me. I think you trust me. But I don't believe you love me. All the same I ask you to marry me. I love you. You know that. But it isn't only that, the fact of my love which makes me ask you to do this. I honestly think that if you will marry me I can make life much safer for you. You aren't happy in the unsafe life. You've lived it and sufficed."

very much through living it. Some women seem made for that kind of life, the adventurous, unprotected life. But I don't think you are. There's some quality in you which is at odds with that life. You've got audacity but it's mixed up with something the reverse of audacious. Often I believe you shrink inside when the outside is bold and commanding. You've just broken with a past that has made you very miserable. You had the moral courage to break with it. You've got to start again. In fact you have started again. You did that when you signed with Champion. All this is a new departure. Why not give me the chance to keep by your side as you go? I won't bother you. I won't ask you for more than you wish to give. My eyes are open, I think. Evidently I'm not the man you could ever fall in love with. I wish I was. But if you'll marry me there's one thing I surely can do. I can make things safe for you. I shall know how to do that. Wouldn't you be happier in the life made safe than you are now?"

She looked up at him and he thought that her eyes were full of enquiry.

"You talk about safety, Martin. But what danger am I in?"

She saw that he hesitated. Then he said:

"There will always be dangers for you unless you have someone with you who has the right to protect you."

She sat very still. Her face changed. She seemed to be thinking deeply. As she didn't speak he said presently, when the silence between them had lasted, he thought, for a long time:

"There's something I wish to tell you. I'll manage to pay in my cheque for the contents of the house to-morrow."

"To-morrow!"

Her face flushed.

"Really to-morrow!"

"Yes."

"I can pay him—Champion—to-morrow! Oh, Martin!"

"Valentine, if you could only tell Champion when you pay him that you are going to marry me! If you could pay him and tell him!"

"Yes—I know! But, dear Martin, you wouldn't be really happy with me unless I really loved you. Nowadays heaps of people seem to get along—I won't say happily, for who is happy? I'll say cheerily—get along cheerily without

love. But you aren't like them. I daresay you sometimes think you're cynical. You look on often, and you see, and you laugh. You've got a watchful brain that doesn't make many mistakes. But all the same *you* want love, Martin. That's the trouble with you. And you want it because you have deeps in you, as I have, and so you *know* it's the great thing and should be the basis of life. And I can't give you what you need."

"Perhaps you might be able to eventually?"

"I don't believe I could. I am terribly sensual, Martin. That's what has spoilt my life. Lots of women aren't sensual at all. You must have often been puzzled by me. Haven't you?"

"I have been puzzled."

"The hard thing for me is this, that I'm terribly sensual and yet I have something in me which hates sensuality, and rejects it, and wants to get far away from it and to stay always away from it. And that thing in me loves purity, as a dedicated virgin with a vocation might love it. And so I am always at odds, and troubled, and can't ever be calm and at peace. A woman like me, if she marries at all, ought never to marry a man who doesn't attract her body as well as the rest of her. I am speaking brutally, Martin, but I am being absolutely sincere with you. Perhaps I am hurting you very much. But as you love me you have a right to my sincerity. So I give it to you."

"I don't mind suffering if you'll allow me to keep you out of danger."

"I don't believe you could keep me out of danger."

Dale felt this remark as a spear point which made the whole of him quiver. But, by an effort which seemed to him supreme, he hid his hurt, and said in an unchanged voice:

"Perhaps not. I can't know that yet, and perhaps even you can't. All I ask is this—let me try to. Come back to your home, to all the beautiful things that are still in it, and live in it with me. I will keep you from money troubles. I will work for your talent. I will help you—I know I can do this—to develop it."

A gush of impatience broke out of her, like a water spring released from the earth by the sharp and final jab of a spade or stroke of a pickaxe.

"And Champion says—he is always saying it—that he will help me to develop my talent! But I don't want to be helped

by men. Always helped, helped, helped! And always by men!"

"Well, what about Father Bexland?" exclaimed Dale.

"Father Bexland!"

She was obviously startled by this question.

"Yes—Father Bexland!"

"That's—that's utterly different."

"Isn't he a man?"

"Father Bexland is a priest," she said.

And then she added, with a sound in her voice which Dale was never to forget:

"Keep your hands off him."

There was something, to Dale, actually terrible both in the expression of her face and in the sound of her voice as she said that. He felt that his whole body went pale like a thing stricken. And his hands trembled. He saw them trembling.

"I'm sorry I've—there's no need for you to—I had no intention of saying one word against——"

"No, no, Martin! Of course not! But you can't understand, having no definite religion, what I, as a Catholic, feel about my confessor. Don't let us talk about it."

"No, we won't. Well, I must go. It must be pretty late."

His hands were still trembling.

She got up and put her hand on his arm.

"Don't go in anger."

"I'm not angry. It was you who were angry."

"Was it anger?"

She seemed to ask herself that question.

"I don't feel as if it was what we generally understand by anger, Martin dear."

"Perhaps not."

"If you ever believe as I do you will know."

"Well, good-night, Valentine. Anyhow, to-morrow—some time to-morrow—you can settle with Champion."

She pressed his arm.

"I will do it, thankfully. You believe that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Martin, you make me feel I'm a brute."

"Nonsense!"

"But you do, Martin. What am I to do? Mustn't I be

sincere with you? Can't you stand it? Can't any man stand a woman's sincerity?"

"Probably not!" he said. "Unless he's gone into retreat from the sexual life."

She bowed her head and stood looking down.

"Unless he's a priest."

"Yes."

"That's rather sad, Martin."

"Life is sad, I think, in its depths. Good-bye, Valentine."

He moved to go away, then suddenly came back, put his arms round her shoulders, pressed her and said:

"I shall never be able to love another woman, never."

Then he released her. He was going to the door when they both heard a tap on it.

"Come in!" Valentine said.

The door opened and the genteel maid appeared holding a siphon and a tumbler.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but you ordered a siphon for to-night and I'd forgot it."

"Oh, thanks very much. Put it down, please."

"Good-night, Miss Morris."

"Good-night. You might show Mr. Dale out, Lizzie."

"Certainly, ma'am."

Dale followed the maid's self-conscious back down the stairs.

CHAPTER XLVIII

TWO days later, when Champion was at the Central Theatre in the evening with Grant, who was giving up an engagement at the end of June, Meyer came in with a letter.

"Just come for you, Mr. Champion."

"Give it here," said Champion, carelessly. "Well, Grant, as I was saying, I envy you."

Meyer slipped out. Grant softly sucked his false teeth.

"If you envy me why don't you do the same? There's

nothing to prevent you that I can see. You're five times richer than I am."

"What? After the money I'm putting down to——"

"To get rid of me and have the whole thing in your own hands! Yes, to be sure! Why——"

"Now, Grant, you know perfectly well I don't want to get rid of you. You've said again and again you were sick of management and wanted a rest. Why, only yesterday you were telling me that you thanked God at last you had a chance to travel after slaving here in London for—how many years is it?"

"I've lost count. That's all very well, Jack, but now the time's nearly come for me to clear out I don't know what the devil I'm going to do without the theatre."

He looked round the room with his large and plaintive dark eyes.

"I believe I'm a fool to go," he added.

"Well, it's done now!" said Champion.

He hadn't looked at the letter he had taken in his hand, and now he laid it down on the big writing-table still without looking at it. So many letters were brought to this room during each day. It was sure to be from some unsuccessful actress asking for an engagement, "writing in" probably for a part in the next production.

"You're damned keen to get me out, Jack. You want to have Morris all to yourself. That's what it is."

"That's as much as you know about it!"

Grant's roving dark eyes fixed themselves for a moment in a very understanding look at Champion's big face.

"I'm not a babe, Jack. I got away from the milk-bottle more years ago than you think for."

"What's the bottle got to do with it?"

"You won't find it all plain sailing with Morris even when I'm no longer here."

"Plain sailing's damned dull. Every great actress is temperamental—bound to be."

"Still think she's great, do you?"

"She soon will be under my management. She made a bad mistake appearing in Constantine's play. But now she's going to come back."

"You'll have trouble with her, Jack."

"That'll be all right. She understands me now."

"She may. But I don't believe you understand her."

"Why? What d'you mean?"

"She'll give you surprises yet."

"Not she, Lez! She's quieted down. She went thro' a lot at the London Playhouse with old Carrie Geean Trever. And then the loss of her kid! She knows now w' her real friend."

Grant twisted his thick lips in a grimace that seemed be half a smile and half a sneer.

"I say, Jack, it's rather late in the day for you to talk about your friendship for women to me."

"When it's a question of art——"

"Give it a rest, Jack!"

"I'll bet a thousand to one I care more for art than you do."

"You wouldn't care much for it in an ugly woman, Jack."

"It's no use talking to you," said Champion, and
"You're the biggest cynic that ever tried to run a theatre—that's a large order, God knows. Just because a man carries a hard shell when his interests call for it you think he has no fine feeling for anything. Well, you'll see different when I get to work with Valentine Morris. She's never had a chance till now, but I am going to see that she gets it. And I understand each other now, and we shall work together like——"

"And what about Dale?"

"Dale!"

"Yes, Dale. Mean to say you don't know Dale's in love with her?"

"And let him be in love with her! Keep him quiet. Dale's all right as an author, but he's no damned good as a lover. His legs are three inches too short."

"Think women only care for long legs, do you?"

"Depends on the woman! Val Morris may be as much in love with them as they make 'em, but for all that when it comes to counting things it's the body that counts with her. Don't you try to tell me anything about women I don't know, Lez. Dale's a talk like a Prime Minister, and write better than Shaw, and come the romantic and highbrow till Judgment Day. Val Morris'll never think of him as a lover unless he can get him a new pair of legs. I ain't afraid of Dale."

He turned his cigar round in his big mouth, and stretched out his hand for the letter Meyer had brought.

"Another of these damned women writing in for a part!" he said. "As if we had to go into the street to pick up a cast!"

He turned the letter over with the address uppermost.

"Hulloh!"

Grant, who was watching, saw the big face change completely. The hard expression went out of it. Suddenly it looked eager, full of keen anticipation.

"A love-letter, eh, Jack?"

"Love-letter! What rot'll you say next? It's from Val Morris—about the play. I was expecting——"

He stuck a large finger under the flap and tore the envelope, pulling out its contents with rough swiftness. There were two things inside, a letter and something else.

"What's this?" Grant heard him mutter.

Then he stared, and his face became mottled with a dull reddish colour. He didn't say anything, just stared and went on staring at the slip of paper he held. Finally he folded it, bunching up his large lips like a man making a determined effort not to speak, put it away in the inner pocket of the double-breasted jacket he was wearing, and looked at the letter. His face was still mottled with red, and a furious expression had come to it.

Grant sucked his teeth, looked about the room, then picked up the late edition of *The Evening News* which lay folded on the table near him. He heard a faint rustle of paper as Champion turned a sheet; then, in a moment, another, more violent, rustle. He looked up. The letter had vanished.

"For Christ's sake let's have a whisky!"

"Right O, Jack!"

Grant's thumb went to the bell. Meyer came.

"Whisky, Meyer!" said Grant.

"Certainly, Mr. Grant."

"What sort of a house is it?"

"Not very good, Mr. Grant. About half full I should say."

Meyer went out.

"I wish I'd had a success to finish up with!" said Grant, plaintively.

Champion had got up and was standing with his hands thrust deep down in the pockets of his wide trousers.

"You're well out of it!" he said, roughly, in a voice that matched his face. "The bloody theatre's more bother than

it's worth. Sucks money out of you and keeps you restless the time ! "

" Then why the hell d'you want to have the whole burden of it on your own shoulders ? "

" Because I'm a God damned fool."

He squared his shoulders.

" But I'm not one to be ruined. Never fear ! I haven't got where I am by letting people play with me. No, sir ! It's funny how women always think they're cleverer than men. I ain't it, Lez ? The stupidest woman ever foaled always thinks she can walk round a man when she wants to and he'll never see where she's going. But my eyes ain't shut like a new-born puppy dog's. Tchar ! Come on, Meyer ! Give me the bottle ! "

" I say, Jack, that's a pretty stiff drink ! "

" So I meant it to be ! "

* * * * *

" Well, I'm off, Lez ! "

" Off already ! Aren't you going to see the return ? Give me the return, Meyer ! "

" Certainly, Mr. Grant."

" Damn the return ! This play's on its last legs. I'm coming off. Who cares for the returns ? You wait till I get to work with the new play. Then you'll hear the box office humming. The public's going to dance to my tune, Lez. Don't you make any mistake about it. And there'll be others going to dance to my tune, too ! "

He poured out some more whisky.

" You're a fool to drink it neat, Jack."

" That's all you know about it. So long ! "

" Wonder what that was in the letter ? " Grant said to himself. " Looked like a cheque. But she's on the rocks. More likely she'd be getting a cheque from him ! "

CHAPTER XLIX

CHAMPION walked from the Central Theatre towards Bloomsbury. But when he got into Holborn he hesitated. For a moment he stopped and stood still on the crowded pavement. Then he went on into Oxford Street, continued towards the Marble Arch, turned back and again hesitated. Finally he made his way into Gower Street, and, walking on the opposite side of the street, went on till he was opposite to Tatford's Hotel. There he paused and looked across at the hotel.

The front door was open. Two men, one the clerk—he was a clerk—whom Dale had spoken to, were smoking on the step before it. Open windows and lights showed behind. Champion could see figures, heads of women, inside the house. There was an air of publicity, even of promiscuity.

"I can see her in that damned hole!" Champion said to himself.

And he turned away, hailed the first cab he met and drove to the Automobile Club. Leaving his hat and stick with an attendant who stood behind a broad counter, he took a ticket with a number on it, went into the big room on the ground floor beyond the lavatory, sat down at a table and wrote the following note.

"DEAR MISS MORRIS,

I have just received your cheque for five thousand pounds and beg to acknowledge the receipt of it with thanks. I am not sending you a formal receipt herewith, nor am I paying the cheque into my bank straight away. I want to see you first. Our arrangement was that you were to pay me the money you owed gradually week by week out of your salary at the theatre. There was no hurry about the matter. And I don't care to take this money from you in a lump sum like this. I'm sure you have need of money. Believe me, I'd rather stick to our arrangement. So I'm holding the cheque till I see you. I wait as far as your place to-night, but it looked so busy—people on the steps and old women at the windows—that I decided not to go in even if you were at home. My wife wants to know if you won't dine with us—nobody else—to-morrow

night in Park Lane at eight. Do please come. Then you and me'll have a bit of a business talk after dinner and straighten this little matter out. You might telephone me. I'm sure you'll say yes. Really I can't go taking thousands off you like this when I know you're on the rocks.

Cordially,

PERCY J. CHAMPION."

Having written this letter Champion sent it off by a messenger and then walked home to Park Lane. Mrs. Champion was away. She had gone to stay with some "cronies", as she called them, who had a house on the Thames. So Champion was alone in the big house. But Val Morris didn't know that and, if she accepted his invitation, it would be very easy to vamp up some excuse for his wife's absence. He went into his library, poured out one more drink, lit a huge cigar, sat down in a deep leather chair, then took out Valentine's note and cheque. He re-read the letter carefully, sat still apparently considering it, then slowly tore it up and dropped the fragments into a litter basket. Meanwhile the cheque lay on the writing table where he had laid it. Now he took it up, stared at it with angry eyes, and seemed about to tear it like the letter. For he got hold of it with both hands and even bent one hand inwards towards him, the other outward away from him. But perhaps the words "Five thousand pounds," written in Valentine's large handwriting, were too much for him. For he didn't tear the cheque, but presently took a tin box out of a drawer, opened it, dropped the cheque in and locked it away. Then he went on smoking and drinking.

Soon after ten o'clock the telephone whirled. Champion got up quickly, though rather unsteadily, went to it and took the receiver. Valentine Morris was speaking from Tatford Hotel. She had been in communication with the Central Theatre, and finding that Champion wasn't there now telephoned to his house.

"You're coming to-morrow night?" he asked. "My wife's expecting you."

"Can I speak to her?" Valentine asked.

"She's out to-night. I'm home by myself."

"It's kind of you but really there's no business to discuss is there? I'm only too thankful to be able to pay my debt to you so soon."

"I don't half like it. I'm sure you need money."

"It's quite all right. I've unexpectedly got rid of the contents of my house as I told you in my letter, sold them *en bloc*. I never thought I should. As it is I'm able to pay you without any difficulty."

"Anyhow I shan't pay in the cheque till I've seen you. That's sure. I mean it, and you know I'm an obstinate man."

There was a pause. Then Champion said:

"We must have a talk first."

"I can't see that there's anything to talk about," said Valentine's voice.

"Just as you like. But that cheque don't pass into my account till I've seen you. We made a bargain. Now you're trying to change it, get out of it."

"I simply discharge my debt directly I'm able to do so."

"How do I know you are really able? How do I know you are not in queer street just because you're doing it?"

"It's merely a question of economising——"

"Among a pack of old women and bank clerks! I know. Well, I won't stand for that. You've got to be comfortable. An artist like you——"

"There is somebody here who wants to use the telephone."

"Well then—may we expect you to-morrow to dine?"

"If Mrs. Champion really——"

"She does. It was her idea. She's dead keen on it."

"But I thought you wrote from the club."

"So I did. She was there with me on her way to Covent Garden. She's at the Opera to-night."

"But does she——" a pause, then—"I must ring off really."

"We're to expect you?"

"Very well—thanks!"

She rang off.

Champion smiled grimly and went heavily back to his chair. He sat in his library till late smoking incessantly, taking a drink now and then, but not reading. It was long past midnight when he went up to bed.

On the following day he sent for his chef and ordered dinner, choosing the menu himself, and being very "particular"—as the chef said afterwards to the butler—about it. Later he went to the theatre and saw to business, lunched with a couple of City men at *Ciro's*, returned to the theatre and

studied, with Hawkins, some plans of scenes for Dale's new play. His mind was full of the future, full of this piece which he was going to put on the stage without Grant's help. He was going to show London how a big play should be done. He was going to make his reputation as a manager and Valentine Morris's as an actress once and for all. This play of Dale's so perfectly and ingeniously designed to show all the facets of Valentine's art, must be an unassailable success; not merely a London success but a world success, as that notorious old play of Dumas fils had been, as, though in a lesser degree, "Magda" had been. He would show everybody his true value as an artistic producer, and he would show Val Morris how much more than a clever business man he was. She would learn to realise his more delicate, his finer side. Hitherto people had usually attributed to Grant's talent any artistic success the Central Theatre had had. He, Champion, had been looked upon as interested mainly in the financial side of the undertaking. That view of the critics and of the public was going to be changed. Many things were going to be changed when he was in sole command with Val Morris safe in his hands, bound to him for five years certain. There was going to be no more breaking of contracts. He would know how to show who was master. There was going to be no more nonsense. Old Carrie and Trevor had been put in the cart, in spite of old Carrie's artfulness and Trevor's sensual attraction of a beau mâle. But he, Champion, knew how to deal with a woman, however difficult and capricious she might be. Hadn't he shown that already by inducing Val Morris to come back to him and to bind herself to him for five years? He had stepped in at the psychological moment, had intervened precisely when Val had been caught, trapped, by a crisis in her life. And he had "brought the thing off" triumphantly. She had reason to be grateful to him and he wasn't going to let her forget that. He meant to rub that well in. False delicacies and supersensitive refinements were not for him. And they didn't "go down" with women. And in spite of all her whimsies and all her disdains Val Morris had been through the mill. She had tramped the Provinces for years. She had had lovers. She had borne an illegitimate child, been mother to a "bastard." And she had fallen for Trevor, a handsome animal who didn't know the first thing about art with a capital A. He, Champion, would know how to

deal with Val Morris. And he thought of that cheque for five thousands pounds and smiled grimly. She wasn't going to "play him up" with any nonsense like that. He'd settle that matter to-night.

He went home eventually from the theatre full of fierce purpose, the slave driver keenly alive in him, having left word with Meyer that he wouldn't be back again that night.

At five minutes to eight he was dressed for dinner, and waiting in the huge drawing-room among Mrs. Champion's "bibelots," ready with his lie about his wife's absence.

It was five minutes past eight when the drawing-room door opened and the butler announced:

"Miss Morris."

Valentine came in, wearing the same simple black gown she had worn on the night when Mrs. Champion and Dale had been of the party. Directly she was in the room she looked round it, obviously for Mrs. Champion.

"How are you, Miss Morris?" said Champion, coming to her with outstretched hand and a cheery smile. "I've got to throw myself on your mercy to night."

"Why?" asked Valentine.

"My wife isn't here. She had to go down to Cookham quite unexpectedly. You know she's got a great friend there, Mrs. Jervoise, one of her few real friends. Well, she got a line this afternoon, and it seems Lil's been taken suddenly ill and is all alone in the house. She begged Virginia to go and be with her. Virginia didn't want to. In fact she wired to refuse. But then her conscience smote her, and she ordered round the motor and went off. She left endless messages with me begging you to forgive her. Perhaps I ought to have telephoned and explained how it was. But—well, I didn't do that because I was so darned arraid you might throw me over if you knew I was alone. Would you have?"

Valentine, who had stood looking at him rather too steadily while he spoke, answered:

"Yes, I think I should."

"Then I'm glad I had the right instinct—not to telephone."

"Dinner is served, sir," said the butler.

"After all we must both dine somehow. Why not together?" said Champion, cheerily. "And we can talk things over thoroughly. I've been planning out the sets

with Hawkins only this afternoon. You know the play. I'll just tell you our ideas."

He kept the conversation—or rather the monologue—going as they walked to the dining-room, to which Valentine went after a moment of obvious hesitation and with a faint reluctance which didn't escape him; he kept it going till dinner was well under way. But she didn't respond. When she came into the dining-room she had looked weary; more than tired, weary with a weariness that was surely rather of the spirit than of the flesh. And now, sitting opposite to him (reluctantly?) at the large oval table under the shaded lights, elaborately draped and trimmed with hanging crystals, she looked critical, detached, uncordial. He even thought that at moments she had a wary expression, like one treading a path in which she suspected an ambush.

"Didn't she believe what I said about Virginia, damn her?" he thought uneasily.

But he talked on with loud and steady cordiality, and always about the play and their common future.

"We—we—we!" The word came perpetually on his lips. "We must do this—we will do that—we'll knock 'em—we'll make old London sit up—we'll show people something they haven't seen before."

And the butler and the very tall footman offered them delicious food cooked by a *chef* who was a master of his art. But she had evidently a very poor appetite, and didn't seem the least interested in turtle soup, sole *à la Russe*, or the other delights he had ordered for her. And she drank no wine at all, only sipped a little St. Galmier water with some lemon squeezed into it. So he was all alone with the champagne, and was angrily conscious that the change food and wine were operating in him found no echo in her.

This reluctant and surely aloofly critical attitude of his guest presently got on Champion's nerves, and began to irritate him, at first obscurely, but after a while with a definiteness almost savage. As he went on talking across the too many flowers, orchidaceous, of course, and struggling to be noticed amid masses of maidenhair fern, at the haggard but beautiful woman for whom he had done, and intended to do, so much, and believing he detected even a suspicion of disdain in her often down-looking eyes and silent lips, he told himself what her record was, as he knew it.

She was a woman who had been during the greater part of

her life poverty-stricken, unsuccessful, completely "out of it." She was probably of humble birth. Her mother was a very ordinary woman. Champion called her "homely." The mother had been good-looking, no doubt, but she hadn't a penny, and one didn't even know whether she had ever been married or not. As she never spoke of her husband, and as Valentine never mentioned her father, the presumption was that there was something about him which they wished to conceal.

"I'll bet she's illegitimate!" Champion said to himself.

For years she had knocked about in the provinces acting in third-rate companies and living in theatrical lodgings of the poorer class. Champion knew all there was to know about that kind of life. Not much refinement there. A certain amount of good comradeship, perhaps, but plenty of coarse conduct, coarse language, coarse living. In that life she must have found the lover who had given her a child and deserted her. And of course he hadn't been her only lover. There had been plenty of others, no doubt. Why even within the last year there had been Trever. She hadn't, of course, lived with Trever openly, but Champion hadn't the slightest doubt about the nature of their intimacy. His jealousy hadn't tortured him for nothing. Trever had been her lover. That was absolutely certain. And on that record she gave herself these airs of refinement, of critical aloofness, almost at times of disdain. It wouldn't do. It wouldn't go down. He wasn't going to put up with it. And he remembered how Dale had brought her to the Central Theatre to him, her fight for a hearing, her desperate necessity to get a footing in London. And he—he ignored Grant in his mind—he had given her that footing. If it hadn't been for him she'd be wandering in the Provinces now, unknown, unheard of, poor, despairing. And now he had got her out of that awful hole she was in with old Carrie Geean. He had paid up for her. He had saved her from being sued in the law courts for breach of contract, and shown up before the whole world as a woman whose word wasn't her bond. And for all this that he had done for her what had he got from her? In his own theatre she had flouted him and metaphorically trampled over him. She had nicknamed him Caliban. She had refused to have him and his wife in her house. And at the first opportunity she had left him and gone off to another theatre to make money for old Carrie and

Trever, and incidentally for herself, leaving him to Maud Eden and his losses with her.

That was this woman's record. And now there she sat, merely playing with her food, refusing to drink, and keeping always that damned air of aloof detachment, as if she were a superior being and he were the last of nobodies.

"And she owes everything to me!"

He said that to himself as he laboured to keep some talk going. And presently he added savagely, as it were sweating under the burden she left him to bear:

"And by God she's going to pay!"

The butler offered her ice-pudding made with peaches. She took about half a spoonful.

"I say, you must take some more. My *chef's* great with his ices. You've eaten nothing. If you go on like this you'll be a skeleton. And who likes a skeleton on the stage?"

He laughed painfully.

"Makes 'em think of what they'll come to some day."

She stared. He knew she was thinking of her boy and cursed himself for a fool.

"Come, now! Have a little more!"

He helped her himself.

"It's good, isn't it?"

"Delicious!"

But there was no satisfaction in her voice.

He went on talking about the theatre till dessert was on the table and the men, at a sign from him, left them.

"Have some port!"

"No, thanks."

"Anyone'd think you were Pussyfoot's wife! No fruit?"

"No, thanks."

He looked at the decanter of port, but refrained.

"Well, what do you say to having coffee in the library? It's cosy in there. The drawing-room's so big for two."

When they were in the library alone with their coffee before them, Champion pushed out his chest.

"I say, what's the matter to-night? You don't seem a bit interested in what's going with the play. Where's your spring?"

"My spring!" she said, as if startled by the word.

"Yes, your snap! This is a new start you're making with me. We've got to put our backs into this, you and me. The

management's new. The play's new. We've all got to be bright and busy. Ain't you looking forward to it?"

"Tell me something," she said, looking at him with a fixity which made him feel uncomfortable under his mask of assurance. "Does your wife know I'm here to-night?"

"Of course she does! Didn't I tell you——"

"Yes, you told me. But that doesn't make it true. We pass half our lives in listening to things that are *told* us and that are just simply lies."

"Why should I tell you lies?"

"Haven't you told me one to-night?"

There was something in her large eyes, a peculiar expression, which inhibited him from playing a part very natural to him, the part of a bold liar.

"Well, I have," he said, unexpectedly. "Truth is my wife doesn't know. She's away on the Thames, as I said, but she doesn't know."

Valentine was silent.

"What does it matter? What is there in your dining here with me. Breaking the ten commandments, are we?"

He laughed.

"If a manager mayn't eat a bit of food with his leading actress things are coming to a pretty pass! What's the matter with you?"

His mind seemed to tear at her record.

"I'll bet you've dined alone with Trever plenty of times."

She ignored this remark. Nothing in her pale face showed that she had even heard it.

"If it's so simple and ordinary why lie about it?" she said.

"Why? Why?"—he paused—"why, because you're so damned odd. A man never knows what you're up to. If I'd said I was alone you mightn't have come—though God knows why you shouldn't. You wouldn't have come. You said so just now!"

"Why were you so anxious that I should come just to-night?"

"Because of that cheque."

He got up, went over to the writing-table, pulled out a drawer, unlocked a tin box, took out the cheque Valentine had sent him.

"I can't take this cheque from you."

"Yes, you must."

"But our bargain was——"

"I'm able to pay and I pay. Honest people pay their debts."

"Haven't you got plenty of others not paid yet?"

She seemed, he thought, to stiffen. But he went on hardily.

"Why should all the others wait out in the cold because of me? And *they* aren't your friends as far as I know. Our understanding was that——"

"Please" she interrupted. "Don't go into all these unnecessary things. You were very good to me. You paid Carrie Geean for me. Now I'm able I pay you back. There's an end of it."

"But I don't see it that way. Here are you living in a one-horse boarding-house in Bloomsbury——"

"I wish to live simply."

"Simply! I looked at the place only——"

"I'm not going to stay there long. But anyhow, please, all that is my own affair."

"No, it isn't. You're my leading actress now and I won't stand for your living in such quarters. Why, people'll think I ain't going to give you a decent salary. The papers'll get hold of it and——"

"Please—I shall always live as I like."

An inexorable sound in her voice increased the nervous irritation he had been feeling all through dinner. The longing of the slave driver to be absolute master, to be arbiter of fate, grew within him, and with it an acute sensation of being wronged by this horribly independent creature, who wouldn't let him thrust her neck under his yoke. He looked at her with half-shut eyes under his tufted eyebrows.

"Seems to me you think of no one but yourself," he said.

"Haven't I a right to live as I choose?"

"Who's interfering with you?"

"My contract with you doesn't stipulate that I'm not to live at Tatford's Hotel," she said, now faintly smiling and in a lighter voice. "My contract stipulates that I am to act for you, not that I am to live according to your ideas."

As she went on speaking her voice changed again and became restive.

"We don't want to quarrel, do we?" she continued.

"And we shan't, I'm sure, if——"

"It what?"

"If you'll always remember that it's hands off my life"

The last sentence sounded to him like a threat. It stung him. He felt it as a defiance. It made him long to break her. Again he thought of her record as he knew it, of what she had been when she first came to him, of her illegitimate child, of her affair with Mark Trever, a man, in his opinion, infinitely inferior to himself, of her debts, of his efforts at rescue. And hadn't he brought that damned old Carrie's demand upon this woman, who now called upon him to keep his hands off her life, down from sixteen thousand pounds to five?

"Gratitude don't trouble you much, I must say!" he said.

"Am I ungrateful?"

"Well, I've done my best by you. When you first struck me I may have been a bit rough, perhaps. But once I saw your worth I worked hard to put you where I thought you ought to be. You made your first success with me. And when you'd made it you didn't half walk over me in my own theatre. Theatrical London calls me Caliban at this minute because of you. I don't mind that." (He shook his huge shoulders.) "I've got a broad back and can carry a lot. But you did your best to make me look ridiculous. You shunted me and my wife right out of your life once you were a success. Everyone was to be let in except us. And the first opportunity you got you threw me over and went to another theatre to make money for yourself and two people who, whatever you may think of 'em, aren't fit to black my shoes. Then, when you're hard on the rocks, I do what I can to get you off 'em, give you the finest contract I've ever framed up with any actress, and knock eleven thousand pounds off old Carrie Geean's bill for the broken contract. And all you've got to say to me in return is 'Keep your hands off my life!' And not only that!" (He turned the cheque in his hands.) "You hurry to pay me off as if I were some damned pawnbroker and you'd put something up the spout with me and were mad keen to get it out. I've had some rough times in my life and seen a pretty good lot of human nature, as they call it, with the lining turned the wrong way out, but upon my word you've been able to teach me a new lesson. What's the good of trying to do the best for anyone? That's what I say. All you get in return is a kick that a Spanish mule couldn't match."

He said the last words with a sort of cynical savagery.

"Fact is," he added, after a pause. "If you want to

get anywhere in this world you've got to get your kick in first. And that's all there is to it."

"But why just because I pay a debt——" she began, in a low hesitating voice, looking up at him as he stood before her with her cheque twisted up in his big fingers.

"I don't want you to pay it. I was pleased you felt able to let me settle for you."

He stared down at her.

"Who's given you all this money?" (He paused, drawing down his brows.) "I'll—I'll bet it's Dale!"

"It is not given money," she said. "It comes from the sale of practically everything I possess, except some clothes, a few books and trifles, and the bungalow at Birchington which I've let furnished, as you know. My things are valued at six thousand pounds."

"And might I ask who's bought 'em—the whole lot of 'em?"

"Mr. Dale has bought them."

A dull brick red appeared in Champion's face.

"So it is Dale!" he said.

"Mr. Dale is taking my house just as it stands."

"What the house too!"

"Why shouldn't he? Hasn't he a right to take a house if he likes it?"

"Ain't he got a good house of his own and furniture too? What should he want two houses in London and two sets of furniture for?"

"Mr. Dale has chosen to do this. I didn't ask him to do it. He came home and arranged it all before I knew anything about it."

Champion laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" said Valentine, with a sharp edge to her voice.

"Well, it's all pretty thin, isn't it? Seems to me the debt's just floating about like a child's air ball. First it's on Carrie you're owing to and I who pay up. And then it's on you're owing to and Dale who pays up. And then it's on Dale you're owing to and—who comes in next?"

"I have just told you that Mr. Dale has entered in possession of my house and practically everything I owned."

"And do you really mean to tell me a fellow like Dale would ever have taken that house on top of his own, or bought a single stick of the furniture that's in it, or a picture off the

walls, if it hadn't been that they belonged to *you* and that he knew you were in the devil of a hole ? ”

He stopped. She said nothing.

“ Why should he do it ? What's the good of it to him ? He's got his home. He's got his own things, things he chose and got together himself according to his own taste and fancy. Why should he go and buy someone else's things on top of that, and a woman's things into the bargain ? Think we men care for all a woman's fal-lals, cushions and pink sofas and all the rest of it ? Think I care for my wife's drawing-room ? Dale's making you a present of the money same as I did, and taking over your things, which he don't want, to get people to think he isn't, to get people to think what isn't true. As you're so keen on truth I wonder you care to stand for that. But what I want to know is why I'm to be shunted out of helping you by Dale ? Wasn't I the one who came to your rescue with old Carrie ? I was. When Dale was enjoying himself out abroad I was here doing the best I could for you. And I say it's a damned shame to pay me off like this, as you might pay off a servant you'd had enough of, with Dale's money. I won't take it. I won't have it. Our bargain was that you were to pay me back gradually, out of your salary, week by week. That's why I offered you such a big one, so as you could pay me back without feeling it too much. I'm not going to take this damned thing. I'm not going to take a present from Dale. So don't you think it ! You're bound down to me for five years and——”

She shivered violently.

“ What's the matter ? ” he said, as if startled, the blaze of his jealousy abated by this abrupt, and strange, physical demonstration on her part.

“ Nothing ! ” she said. “ Go on ! ”

“ Why d'you look at me like that ? ”

“ To show you I'm listening to what you are saying to me.”

“ Well, isn't it true ? Haven't you and Dale figured it up between you that I'm to be paid off because you prefer your debt to be owing to him instead of to me ? ”

“ I have told you that Mr. Dale receives an equivalent for his money,” she said, in an obstinate dull voice.

“ You're all for truth in a general way,” he said, with sudden savage contempt. “ But directly a thing touches you personally, then you're as ready with a lie as anyone else is.”

He was staring down at her, and when he said that he saw

what he thought of afterwards as a silent drama in her eyes. He saw it as a sudden tremendous impulse checked for a moment, a pause in which a conflict took place, a conflict which he didn't understand, then decision, an onrush to destiny.

"You think," she said, speaking in a calm steady voice "that though Martin Dale is getting something for his money getting my house and all there is it at a value fixed by an independent valuer, he's really using all this merely to get me out of my debt to you. Very well! Take it that way. But there's something I haven't told you. Martin Dale has asked me to marry him. And I've decided to do so."

"You—marry Dale!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Go along with you!"

"I am going to marry Martin Dale."

"Rubbish! You're talking to bluff me. When you came into this house to-night you no more thought of marrying Dale than you thought of marrying the Emperor of China."

"I shall marry Martin Dale."

"Have you told him so?"

"I am going to tell him so to-morrow."

"No, you don't!" he said. "You're not going to play me up like that after all I've done for you. I'm not paying you two hundred and fifty a week for five years and making you an actress for the benefit of Master Dale's short legs. don't you think it. Believe me or not, Val, but I come first in this frame-up. You don't know me yet if you think I'm the sort of man who plays second fiddle to a fellow like Dale with any woman. Dale'll never understand you as I do. He don't know what an actress's life in the Provinces with third-rate companies is. I do. I've run companies in the Provinces myself with pretty girls in 'em. I could tell Master Dale a lot that he doesn't know yet. He's got a play for the stage all right, and we're going to use it and do the best with it, me and you. But if you think I'm paying you two hundred and fifty a week for you to turn it over every Saturday night to "My husband, Mr. Dale the famous author," and for him to stow it away in the bank, along with his royalties from me on the play, you're mightily mistaken. I've never let a woman walk round me yet and I'm not going to begin with you. So don't you think it. I gave you y

chance. Grant was in it, but he was only secondary. I've always been the power at the Central and now I'm going to have the whole show in my hands. You owe everything to me. But that's only the beginning. You'll owe me a lot more before we've done with each other. I'm going to make you. I've got plans for you that I haven't told you yet. I'm going to take you travelling. I'm going to take you over the world, but not with little Master Dale, I can assure you. We'll leave him at home with his writing-table, and a stool to put his feet on so's his legs don't hang out in the air. The idea of you marrying Dale!" (He let out a big laugh.) "Why, d'you think I haven't jumped to what you are by this time of day? Dale isn't the sort of man you care for not by a long way, not by—let's say a good seven inches at least. You like 'em bigger than that. You like 'em——"

She held up her right hand in a curious sudden gesture as if she wanted to put it over his mouth. But he went on.

"Come now!" he said, brutally. "You're all for truth according to you. You were down on me just now for telling you a white lie about my wife. But what's the truth about you? D'you think I'm a fellow who knows nothing about the world and can't see what's slap in front of his eyes? You've been round the Provinces for years. What's the good of playing a man like me up with ignorance and disdain and refinement and all the rest of it? What's the use of this touch-me-not pose to me? It may do very well with Dale who's an intellectual softy, clever as you like in his writing, but a softy for all that. But it won't do with me. I'm a male man, Val Morris, and I've been out in a knockabout world since I was sixteen, same as you have. I know what women are under their skins and you know what men are under *their* skins. You've got a bit of genius for acting and I've got a bit of genius, or talent if you like, for finance. I've got there. You've been pretty near getting there once and come away from it. But you can get there again with my help. But don't you think you can get there alone, and don't you think Dale's the man to get you there. He isn't. He's too soft, too sensitive. He can write about women well enough, or draw one if he gets the right plot. But as to *knowing* women—why he no more knows you than I know—than I know, let's say, Cleopatra. He thinks, I'll bet he

thinks, that you're all for poetry, and refinement, and high-brow notions in a man, that when you're with a man you're looking about for his beautiful soul, and asking for splendid ideas from him and wanting him to go with you way up in the clouds, and that the more sensitive and subtle and all the rest of it he is the more you think of him. Well, I know different, Val."

He thrust his hands deep down into the pockets of his wide evening trousers and gazed at her with an ugly smile. She looked steadily up at him.

"Yes?" she said. "What do you know?"

"I know that when a man like Dale's spouting about his ideas of art and his notions of Life with a capital L you're thinking what a pity it is his legs are too short for his body. And when he plays up as hard as he can to prove to you he's got a powerful brain, you're thinking that a Greek athlete's got a shaped head that'd suit your fancy a damned sight better than his does, whether it had brains inside of it or whether it hadn't. There's women that don't bother much what a man's make and shape are. I'll allow that. But you're not one of 'em, Val! Not you! You're a sensual woman!"

Suddenly he made a forward movement, and dropped down beside her, and put his big face near to hers.

"You're a woman who's governed by the body. You're not out only to get money from men, like half the pretty girls in London are. Half, say three-quarters and you won't go far wrong! You ain't half-sexed, or not sexed at all, as lots of them are. You're a full blooded, lus——"

"That's enough!"

She had spoken in quite a low voice, but it stopped him.

"I don't want to hear any more."

"Well, ain't it true what I say?"

"Some of it is true."

"Some of it! There's not a word that isn't——"

"The ugly part of you can read the ugly part of me. That's all."

He put a great hand on one of her hands.

"Don't tell me when I lay hold of you it doesn't mean more, a sight more, to you than when Master Dale——"

She drew her hand away quickly and some red came into her face.

"Don't speak against Martin Dale."

"I ain't speaking against him. I'm telling you the truth about yourself."

Again he got hold of her hand.

"It's no use, Val, it's not a bit of good your pretending with me. I can rouse things in you Dale could never get near, and I've always known it, even when you walked over me with nails in your shoes in my own theatre. You and me may talk about art and genius and all the rest of it, and have our feelings about 'em, and know what they are when we run up against 'em, but when we get down to the basis, and it's a question of man and woman, why we know very well what we both put before 'em."

He put an arm round her waist. She didn't struggle, but neither did she give him the feeling that she was yielding to him. Her body felt passive, as if waiting—inexpressively.

"I mayn't be as good-looking as Trever. I don't say I am. But for all that I'll bet I could make you feel as he never has."

He felt her body suddenly stiffen against his arm and knew that he had made a mistake.

"But that's an old story," he added hastily. "We don't want to——"

She moved, still keeping her body stiff. He tried to keep her. He could of course have kept her, being enormously stronger than she was. It was something moral in her, not something physical, which made him let her go. She got up. He saw that she was going to speak to him, to say something striking, perhaps even terrible. The expression in her eyes and about her lips told him that. But just as she was going to speak he became aware—she, too; he could see that—of something happening in the house, something not expected by anyone in it. It was as if he felt this without hearing it. He seemed to feel movement, to feel new presence suddenly introduced into the fastness which was his house in Park Lane. And evidently she felt movement, new presences too. For a brief instant they stood looking at each other, linked by this startled knowledge, startled expectation. Then the library door opened and Mrs. Champion walked in, with a large blonde woman made up white, like a clown, and a large blonde man, with a drooping yellow moustache, faint grey eyes, fat cheeks and fat red hands.

They were all in evening dress.

CHAPTER L

WHEN Mrs. Champion saw Valentine she stopped short, and her painted face showed for an instant an expression of amazement, which changed almost immediately into pinched, but smiling suspicion.

"Dear me! Miss Morris here!" she said. "My butler didn't tell us that. He only said *you* were in here, Percy. What's that?" she added, with a sudden acrid sharpness in her voice.

She had seen Valentine's cheque, which Champion had held in his hand through all his conversation with Valentine.

For once Champion was thoroughly taken aback and couldn't conceal it, and before he regained his normal self-possession, with a swift and thin pouncing movement Mrs. Champion had twitched the cheque out of his hand and looked at it.

"Give that here!" said Champion imperiously, recovering himself.

His wife handed back the cheque without a word.

"It seems we've interrupted some important business," she said, with saccharine sweetness.

"How are you, Mrs. Jervoise? How are you, Jervoise?" said Champion, shaking hands with the big white faced-woman and the large man with red hands. "D'you know Miss Morris? I'm sure you've both enjoyed her fine acting. Miss Morris—our friend Mrs. Jervoise. Mr. Jervoise—Miss Morris."

"How d'you do? It's a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Morris. We are both of us, my husband and I, Morris fans if I may say so."

"Miss Morris'll forgive you, Lil. Admiration is a quality ah—that is never unwelcome," said Mr. Jervoise, in a fat muffled voice. "Isn't that so, Miss Morris?"

"Thank you very much," said Valentine, in a cold, quiet voice, totally free from emotion.

"Miss Morris is coming under my management," said Champion addressing the Jervoises. "And we've been having a rather important confabulation about the new play we're going to launch in a few weeks. But what are you all up to. Going somewhere?"

"Well," said Mrs. Jervoise. "I'm afraid I'm the guil-

one this time. I suddenly felt like dancing to-night, and I said to Virginia and my husband, 'Why not pop into the motor, and run up to town, and have a fox-trot and a grilled bone at Ciro's?' They were both game for it, so here we are. Virginia thought we'd look in and see if by any chance you were at home and would come with us. Didn't you, Virgy?"

Champion cast an ugly look at his wife.

"Going to Ciro's, are you?"

"Why don't you both come with us?" said Mrs. Champion. "Miss Morris is an indefatigable dancer. Why in London she's called 'The Bacchante'. Aren't you, Miss Morris dear?"

"Am I? I didn't know it. But I'm not dancing just now."

"The preparations for the new campaign take up all your time, don't they, dear?"

She shook the pink and silver cloak she was wearing from her little pointed shoulders.

"Well, if you really won't come I'll stay with you and Percy for a little while. You go on to Ciro's, Lil, and I'll join you there."

She looked at her friend, blinking her eyelids.

"I'll be with you in a quarter of an hour. You take her, Harry."

"That's all right. Come on, Lil! Good-night, Miss Morris. Very glad to have met you. Hope to meet you often again. Now you're to be under old Percy here's management once more—ah!"

"Yes indeed, Miss Morris. Virginia's friends, once we know them, are our friends. 'The pals of our pals we pal up with at sight, we've but met them at noon they're our pals by the night!' That's a true saying, isn't it? You know it?"

"I don't think I do."

"It's a dear saying, isn't it? And so true! Good-night and arriverderci, as the Italians are so fond of saying. Come Harry! Don't be too long, Virgy darling."

Champion cast another, menacing, look at his wife. In reply to it she sat down, smiling at Valentine. He was obliged to go out with the Jervaises.

Directly they were out of the room Mrs. Champion said,

"Should I be indiscreet in enquiring why you are paying five thousand pounds to my husband, Miss Morris?"

"It's a debt I'm discharging."

"Indeed! It's a very large one! So you and my husband have had money matters between you!"

"One money matter."

"He's been lending you very large sums of money?"

"No. He very kindly lent me one sum of money quite lately when I was in a difficulty. He lent me five thousand pounds. And now I have repaid him."

"Five thousand pounds, if you'll forgive my saying so, is a great deal of money to ask any man to lend you."

"I didn't—" she stopped short; then added quietly, with a sort of frozen composure, "Yes, it is. But as you see I have paid it back. I have sold practically everything I possessed and paid your husband back. There is no other money matter between us, and there never will be."

"I suppose you mean that there never will be outside of the theatre business between you and him?"

"Oh—yes."

"Excuse me! You seem doubtful. What is it?"

At this moment Champion came back, walking resolutely into the room with an angry menacing look on his face. Before he had time to speak his wife said, in her thin sugar-sweet and yet sub-acid voice,

"Miss Morris and I were just clearing up that little matter of the cheque, Percy. Miss Morris naturally felt that she owed it to me to——"

"Miss Morris owes nothing to you, nor ever will. What the hell business is it of yours to barge into our private affairs like this, and bring your damned friends with you at this time of night?"

"No business of mine when my husband's scattering thousands of pounds broadcast among wom—among ladies who, however charming, have really no call upon our banking account! No business of mine when——"

"Shut your mouth or I'll——"

He clenched his big fists and his face seemed to swell, become bigger. It was flooded with a dull red, and for a moment his eyes almost disappeared.

"I'll—I'll——"

He lifted up his arms, and kept his mouth open for a minute. But no more words came. Then suddenly he dropped his arms. His face twisted into a grotesque pattern of ruts and wrinkles. He felt in the outer pocket of his black even-

jacket, found a handkerchief, and violently applied it to the pouches that contained his almost invisible eyes.

"You—you—I'm through with you!" he said, in a shaking, broken voice. "I'm through with you. You've made my life a hell all these years with you—" he threw down the handkerchief on the floor—"Get out with you! Get off to Ciro's! Get after your pals you——"

"Mr. Champion—please!"

"Eh?" he said, confusedly, looking at Valentine.

"I must go now."

"You—it's her I was——"

"I must go, please. Good-night, Mrs. Champion. Good-night."

She went towards the library door quickly. He hurried after her.

"But it's her I——"

She turned round swiftly.

"Stay there, please!"

He stood still. She went out and shut the door. She picked up her cloak in the hall. The tall footman came forward looking solemnly surprised, curious too.

"Open the front door, please! Thank you!"

She was out in the night.

He saw her go away in the darkness, almost running, up Park Lane in the direction of the Marble Arch.

CHAPTER LI

SHE saw a taxicab and lifted her arm. The driver jerked his chin and went on. Another cab approached. Again she beckoned. But the second man did as the first had done. She stopped on the pavement and waited. A tall man in evening dress, and wearing a silk hat, came up, glanced at her, went on slowly, hesitated, came back.

"Excuse me, Miss Morris," he said. "Can I help you? I think you're looking for a cab?"

"Yes, I am."

"Stay there. I'll find you one."

He turned away, glanced up and down the road, then walked very slowly till he was dim in the distance. Valentine waited. In a short time he came back in a taxi-cab, got out and kept the door open.

"Thank you very much," she said, warmly.

She looked up at him. (He was a very tall, middle-aged man.)

"I'm grateful to you—for more than getting the cab."

She got in. He shut the door.

"I'm very glad indeed to have had the chance of doing something, however trifling, for an actress whom I admire sincerely," he said, gravely, with perhaps a slightly old-fashioned courtesy.

His voice was clear, precise but chivalrous.

"Where may I tell him to drive?"

"Tatford's Hotel, Gower Street, please."

He turned to the chauffeur.

"Please go to——"

"One minute!" said Valentine. "What time is it please?"

The tall man took out his watch.

"Ten minutes to eleven."

"Oh, then—please ask him go to Tedworth Square Chelsea. I'll tell him the number presently."

"Tedworth Square, Chelsea," said the man in his clear chivalrous voice.

"Good-night. And thank you—*thank you*."

"Good-night."

He took off his hat. She left him in the night.

When she couldn't see him she leaned hard against the back of the cab and cried.

"*Thank you for being a gentleman!*" she said aloud through her tears. "*Thank you—thank you!*"

She continued speaking to herself and crying for some minutes. Then she sat forward, compressed her lips and wiped her eyes. She looked out of the window, then, after letting the chauffeur drive on for a while, leaned out and gave him the number of Dale's house in Tedworth Square. When the cab drew up there she was out instantaneously and rang the bell. After a rather prolonged pause the hall door was opened by Macfarlane looking surprised and suspicious.

"Oh—Miss Morris!" he said.

"Is Mr. Dale in?"

"No, ma'am. He's out. He's gone to the theatre, I believe!"

"Oh."

She hesitated. Then she said:

"May I come in and wait for him? It's rather important. If I may just sit down somewhere and wait."

"Certainly, ma'am."

"Stop! I'll pay off the cab."

She paid and stepped into the house.

"Where shall I—"

"Will you come into the library, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you."

She walked into the room with the books and the stone-coloured walls.

"Can I get you something, ma'am?"

"No, no thanks. I've just dined. Here's the evening paper." (She picked it up.) "I'll read. I daresay he'll soon be back."

"I should think so, ma'am."

Macfarlane went out.

Valentine stood, then sat down in an armchair by Dale's large writing table. She held the *Evening Standard* on her lap. She turned the pages slowly. The light from the electric lamp on the writing-table fell on them, fell presently on the words, 'Theatrical Notes'.

She looked and saw her name.

"We understand that Miss Morris, who recently left the London Playhouse very abruptly, has accepted an engagement with Mr. Champion, who will shortly be in sole command at the Central Theatre. The terms offered to Miss Morris were exceptionally high. Indeed if we are rightly informed they constitute a record for an English actress in a London theatre. The engagement of Miss Morris is for no less than five years."

"Five years! Five years—five years!" whispered Valentine.

She put the paper down, pushed it away. Then she uttered a long, tremulous sigh, leaned back in the armchair, shut her eyes.

Five years—with Champion! Five years—with Mrs. Champion!

Five —years !

There was no noise of traffic outside. She only heard the slight regular noise of a clock on the mantelpiece. She stayed very still for a long time. Silence was good. Solitude was good. Wrangling—that was terrible, frightful. And about money ! She heard once more with her imagination that voice of vinegar and saccharine say,

“No business of mine when my husband’s scattering thousands of pounds broadcast among wom—among ladies who, however charming, have really no call upon our banking account !”

And then, with a rising inflection, a more piercing intensity.

“No business of mine when——”

Horrible ! Horrible ! Her mind shuddered in its recalling. She felt bruised inside. She sat very still and tried to forget, tried not to feel.

Ting ! It was half-past eleven. If Martin had been to the theatre and didn’t go anywhere afterwards, to the Garrick or elsewhere, he might be back very soon.

—“Who however charming, have really no call upon our banking account.”

Oh, how could a woman be like that ? And yet wasn’t it natural for a woman to be angry, to be curious and suspicious and angry, who had been perpetually deceived, and lied to and tricked and betrayed—as they called it in melodrama—as of course the wretched Mrs. Champion had been ever since she had married Champion ? No doubt it was natural. But she was angry and curious and suspicious in such a witheringly awful way—all in the wrong way. Such a woman would scarcely ever be able to elicit genuine sympathy from anyone. Even though she suffered—and she did suffer—there would always be something in her way of suffering and her showing of suffering, that would make people think—

—“What a dreadful woman !”

It was a quarter to twelve now. Martin must certainly have gone somewhere, to a party or to one of his clubs after the theatre. Otherwise he would surely be home by now.

Valentine got up from her armchair. She could not stay where she was, in Martin’s house, very much longer. She had come there in a state of extreme emotion, quivering with emotion, driven by a violent impulse to seek the man

who understood her as few people did, and who loved her as no one else did. She had come there to tell Martin something that she had already told to Champion.

But this long waiting was having an effect on her mood. Impulse was less in her. She began to feel doubtful. She began to feel almost frightened—of herself and of Martin.

"I'd better go home," she said to herself, with her eyes on the hands of the clock.

To Tatford's! But she wasn't going to stay on there. She was going to leave Tatford's.

Finally she resolved to wait for Martin till midnight. If he didn't return by midnight she would go. She sat down again, and stayed quiet keeping her eyes on the clock.

At two minutes to twelve she knew that he wouldn't come back in time. Perhaps it was better so. She no longer knew what she wished to say to him. She had known when she had arrived at his house. But now it was all gone. The clock struck. She went to the door and opened it.

Macfarlane was sitting on a hard chair in the little hall. He got up quickly.

"Oh!" she said.

"You are going, ma'am?"

"Yes—I'm sorry. I'm afraid I've kept you up."

"Not at all, ma'am."

"Yes, I must have. I won't stay any longer. I wonder whether I can get a cab."

"I'll see at once, ma'am if you'll——"

"There's a cab coming up!" she interrupted.

Macfarlane opened the front door quickly. As he did so a taxi cab stopped by the kerb and Dale got out of it.

"Hullo, Macfarlane! Why are you——" he saw Valentine in the doorway.

"Keep the cab please, Martin!" she said.

"Can you wait?" Dale said to the taxi man.

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?" Dale said, in a low voice, coming to Valentine. "Anything wrong?"

His dark eyes were searching hers.

"All right, Macfarlane!" he added. "It's late. Don't you trouble to wait up any longer."

"Very well, sir."

Macfarlane retreated into the hall and disappeared.

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"What is it? Have you been here long?"

"About three-quarters of an hour or so, I think. Perhaps longer."

"I'm sorry. I've been to the theatre. Afterwards I went to the Garrick."

"I'd better go now."

"Go! But you wanted to see me!"

"I did. But it's so late and——"

"And what?"

"I feel so different now."

She was looking at him in a strange way as she stood in the doorway. Her eyes disturbed him, almost brought fear to him.

"Different! What is the matter, Valentine? You came to tell me something?"

She nodded.

"Well then——"

The taxi-cab man cleared his throat loudly. He was lighting a pipe.

"Come in and tell me," Dale said, "you wouldn't have come if it wasn't something you felt I ought to hear."

But she didn't move to go in, and still those strange eyes were on him.

"Was it something you wanted me to help you about?" he said.

"Yes, I think it was."

"Then you must tell me."

He put out his hand to the hall door. But she stopped him.

"No—don't!"

Now her eyes really frightened him. It seemed to him, in the dimness of the night, that their look at him had become a piercing stare. And this piercing stare, he felt, enveloped him cruelly.

"What is the matter, Valentine?" he said, with sudden desperation. "I must know. Come in. You must tell me. I can't let you go from here till you have told me."

"No. Not now. It's too late. I waited. But you came back too late. I can't tell you now."

"But——"

"No."

"But I didn't know you were coming, you were here. How could I know? If——"

"No, no—of course not! Martin—I'm not blaming you. But it's too late now. I can't come in now."

She stepped out of the doorway, crossed the pavement quickly.

"Please drive to Tatford's Hotel, Gower Street," she said to the cabman.

She got into the cab and shut the door. The cabman drove off. Dale saw her eyes staring at him. The cab turned a corner.

He shivered.

Those staring—staring eyes!

CHAPTER LII

DALE lunched at the Garrick Club on the following day. He had passed a miserable and disturbed night. After Valentine's abrupt departure from his house he had sat up in his library until very late, oppressed by a conviction that something disastrous had sent her to him, and that her refusal to tell him what it was had been caused by some brusque change of mind, or perhaps even of heart, that had taken place in her while she had been waiting for him. She had looked at him so strangely, with such a terrible staring strangeness. Never before had any woman looked at him like that. He had felt stripped naked by those eyes and refused. Yes, those eyes had surely refused him something. But what? What had she been meditating about while she had sat alone in his house, in the room where he worked and chiefly lived? What had she been debating? And if he had come back sooner, if he had not kept her waiting, and, so, given her time for the mental debate which he suspected, felt almost sure of, what would she have said to him, have told him, have, perhaps, confessed to him?

He would never know that. He had a feeling that the woman behind the eyes which had stared at him in the night was inexorable, had become, perhaps suddenly, inexorable. He was afraid of that inexorable woman.

When he went at last to bed he slept very little, and such sleep as he had was neither deep nor refreshing. In the morning, when he was up, he tried in vain to settle to some thing. Finally he went out, walked in Hyde Park, and eventually found his way to the club, where he lunched with some men whom he knew and tried to forget those eyes.

He was sitting with a friend smoking about a quarter to three, trying to interest himself in conversation, when a servant came in with a note on a salver. Directly he saw the man Dale knew that the note was for him. The man looked round, caught Dale's eyes, and came up.

"For you, sir, and there's someone waiting for an answer."

Dale excused himself to his companion and, getting up, took the note and opened it without looking at the writing on the envelope. Inside, written on a sheet of Central Theatre notepaper, were the following words:

"I must see you at once. The matter's urgent. I telephoned to your house but you were out. They say you might be at the Garrick. If this finds you please come round to the theatre at once. If this is *absolutely* impossible will you give the messenger a line making an appointment for to-day at the earliest possible moment.

P. J. CHAMPION."

Dale closed his hand on this communication and turned round to the man he had been sitting with.

"I'm extremely sorry but I must be off. A summons from the theatre. Let us finish our talk another time."

The man said something acquiescent. Dale nodded and went into the hall.

"You needn't wait," he said, to the commissionaire from the theatre. "I'm answering the note myself."

He got into a cab and drove to the theatre.

"Mr. Champion's expecting me," he said, when he got there, to Brewster.

"Yes, Mr. Dale. He's upstairs."

Dale made his way through the familiar regions and directly ran across Meyer, who was looking, he thought, unusually furtive and servile.

"Oh, good day Mr. Dale. Yes, Mr. Champion is here. He'll be very glad to see you. He's been wanting to see you for some time. Please come this way. No, he's not in his usual room."

He wishes to see you quite alone. And Mr. Grant is still here though he isn't at the theatre at the moment."

And Meyer fled on in the gloom, and presently tapped at a door in a corner.

"Come in!" roared Champion's voice from the other side of the door.

Meyer fluttered—that was Dale's impression—fluttered the door open.

"Mr. Dale to see you, Mr. Champion, sir."

Dale was confronted by Champion. He was standing up in a small room that Dale had never seen before, a room like an office, with a large roll top desk, a typewriter, stacks of papers, three or four chairs, a roll of big official looking books on a low shelf, an unlit gas stove, one window of ground glass. On the desk just by his right hand Dale saw a sheet of letter-paper lying. His face looked unusually puffy and there was a savage expression upon it.

"Oh, Dale—you've come!" he said, without any greeting. "I'm not to be disturbed, Meyer. No one's to come in here."

"Certainly not, Mr. Champion. I'll see that——"

"Get off!"

Meyer was gone behind a softly shut door.

"Well, Dale, this is a nice bit of business!" said Champion.

"In all my experience I've never—but of course I'm not going to sit down under it. So don't either of you think it. I'm not a Mark Trever nor a Carrie Geean either. I'm——" he stopped.

His face reddened, became congested. It was obvious to Dale that he was struggling against the onset of a fit of fury.

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Dale said, in an absolutely unemotional voice.

"Mean to say you—haven't you seen Miss Morris?"

"Since when?"

"Since last night."

"I saw her for a moment last night."

"Ah! Of course you did! Of course she ran straight to your house!"

"Your house! Was she with you last night?"

"Of course she was with me, dining with me. Mean to pretend you don't know it?"

"Look here, Champion, don't speak to me like that, please."

I won't allow you, or anyone else, to talk to me in that way. I'm not here to pretend anything. I don't know what has happened, or what you want me for. And if you can't tell me in a decent way I shall go."

Champion stared for a moment fixedly at Dale. Then he said in a voice that sounded more under control,

"What time did you see her last night?"

"Somewhere about midnight."

"Midnight! Where d'you see her?"

"I don't see that that matters. I only spoke to her for a moment."

"What she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything."

"That's pretty thin! You're engaged to marry a woman. She comes to you at midnight. Or you go to her. And then apparently you don't so much as speak to one another. Tell that somewhere else!"

"I engaged to marry Miss Morris!"

"Mean to deny it?"

"Of course I deny it. It isn't true."

"That's another good 'un! She told me herself last night she was going to marry you."

"She told you——"

"Val Morris told me last night when she was dining with me in Park Lane that she was going to marry *you*!" said Champion, violently raising his voice, and harshly accentuating every word.

Dale said nothing. Champion bent and looked into his face.

"Mean to say you didn't know it? Mean to tell me you haven't asked her?"

Dale still kept silence.

"If that's so perhaps you'll tell me as well that you don't know what this damned bit of cheek means!"

He swung round to the roll-top desk, caught up the piece of note-paper lying there and gave it to Dale.

"Here—look at that!"

Dale took it and read, in Valentine's large handwriting:

"Tatford's Hotel,

"Gower Street.

"Thursday night.

"I'm sorry but I can't carry out my engagement with

you. I can't carry out that contract. I never will. No. I can't. This is final. I'm leaving the stage. I've had enough of it. I'm giving it up. Don't think I shall ever go to another theatre, another management. I've done with the theatre for ever. I'm leaving London. Thank God I've been able to pay my debt to you. So I can go.

"V.M."

"Mean to say you're surprised? Mean to tell me you didn't know?"

"I didn't know."

"You didn't! You're marrying a woman and you know nothing about a thing like that?"

"I tell you, and I expect you to believe me, I didn't know."

"If that's so—" again he stared at Dale—"if that's so she's figuring it up that when she marries you you're rich enough to keep her without her doing a stroke of work."

Dale said nothing.

"Well? Are you going to stand for that?"

"Champion, it isn't that."

"'Tisn't that! 'Tisn't that! Then what in hell is it? What's it all mean?"

"What happened last night?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"But I don't know. I saw Miss Morris for a minute, but she told me nothing."

"Where d'you see her?"

"When I came back to my house she was coming out of it."

"Coming out of your house at midnight?"

"Yes. She was coming out."

"And what she say?"

"I asked her what it was—why she had come. She wouldn't tell me. I suppose she had come to tell me something. I don't know exactly—I mean—well, she had evidently come to tell me something. But she didn't tell me. She got into the cab I had come in and drove away."

By the expression in Champion's eyes Dale knew that Champion believed him.

"Just like a woman!" Champion muttered. "They're all alike. Not one of 'em's got an ounce of horse sense—not

one! Come to tell you a thing and then go off without telling it! Damn the lot of 'em! Sit down, Dale."

Dale took a chair. Champion sat down by the roll-top desk. He wasn't smoking. Even whisky was evidently forgotten.

"Anyhow, what's this letter mean? Has she ever said to you she'd give up the stage?"

"Never."

"If she's going to marry you—but you didn't know that, eh?"

Evidently Champion had suddenly "jumped" to the fact that Valentine's statement of the night before had really not been authorised by Dale, that Dale's denial that he was engaged to her had been made in genuine good faith, that there was some mystery here which had taken Dale entirely by surprise.

"Well, anyhow, she said to me only last night—'I shall marry Martin Dale.' So there now!"

His eyes were always on Dale, searching him.

"And she expects you to keep her and pay me heavy damages for breach of contract into the bargain, I s'pose. You ready to do it?"

Dale hesitated for a moment. Then he seemed to come to some resolve, for a steady, very serious, but almost calm expression showed on his face, and he said:

"I've told you I don't understand this, what caused Miss Morris to write this to you. I suppose she came to my house last night to tell me. At any rate she had something important to tell me. You say she dined with you last night."

"Yes, she did."

"Then she must have come straight to my house from yours probably."

"Likely!"

"Well then——"

He stopped. But as Champion didn't speak he finally added, "You don't care to throw any light on the reason for her coming?"

"How d'you know I could?"

"I don't know. Then you can't?"

"Well, I'll acknowledge there was a bit of an upset between us, Val and me, last night."

Dale frowned.

" You know what she is, always has been, as difficult as the devil. It began with—she was expecting my wife to be there."

" Wasn't she there ? "

" No. She'd gone to Cookham. That put Val Morris out. I'd said my wife would be there."

" Oh."

" How was I to prevent my wife from going to Cookham ? "

" I don't know."

Champion lowered his eyes.

" Well, anyhow, that put her out—Val Morris out. And then after dinner there was a bit of a fuss about a cheque. Seems—" he glanced up, and again his eyes looked angry, savage almost—" seems you've bought all her belongings."

" Yes, I have."

" Taken the lease of her house and all ! "

" Yes, I have."

" You've got a lot on your hand'."

" That's my business."

" I wish you luck with two houses in London and two sets of furniture. You can change about, can't you ? Half the week in Tedworth Square and the other half in Wilton Crescent. She told me what you'd been up to and wanted to pay me off with your money."

" You mean pay her debt with the money that was hers ! "

" No, I don't ! I mean just what I say—pay me off with your money. Well, I wasn't standing for that. And there was a dust up between us over it. And in the middle my wife comes in with two friends, Jervoise and his wife from Cookham. They'd come up to go and dance at some damned place or other."

" Oh ! " Dale said, as Champion paused again.

" Yes. And my wife saw Morris's cheque to me. I had it in my hand. For five thousand pounds. Well, she's—well—my wife's a bit queer sometimes about money matters, and when she'd got rid of the Jervoises—they went—she turned rather nasty about this damned cheque, wanted to know more about it. I told her it was none of her business. She said it was and used a rather nasty expression."

" Oh ! "

" Yes ; talked about my scattering thousands of pounds broadcast among ladies who, however charming, had really no call upon my banking account."

"But Miss Morris was paying money to you," Dale said, frigidly.

"Yes, paying back. My wife didn't like it."

"Oh!"

"Then I got angry—and—and then Miss Morris said she'd rather go. And she went."

"I see."

"And—and then on top of it all I get this infernal note. Where the devil has she gone?"

Dale was silent.

"You ought to know surely if anyone does. I had this just after lunch, when I came back from lunch. Of course I telephoned to her hotel. They told me she left this morning, without leaving any address. Think she's gone to Birchington?"

But Dale didn't answer. He sat looking at Champion in silence. His complexion was always pale and his dark eyes, very observant, often had in them an expression that was rather tragic. But now, in this moment—this long moment—of silence Champion thought Dale's face was paler than usual, with a sort of ashen pallor; and the expression in his eyes had become terrible, terrible because it was surely an expression totally denuded of hope.

"What's the matter, Dale?" he said at last, as Dale didn't speak. "What is it—boy?"

"I know," Dale said. "I know."

"Know what?"

"Why couldn't you let her alone?"

"Let her alone! What d'you mean?"

"Why couldn't you——"

He stopped.

"Why couldn't I——"

He stopped again, and was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"D'you remember that man I was with at Lucerne when you came to see me there?"

"The priest? To be sure I do."

"Father Bexland."

"Bexland, yes. I dined with him. He'd been a soldier, I remember, been in the Guards."

"Yes. That man had released himself from women."

"From women?"

"Yes, from clawing women."

"Mean by becoming a priest?"

"Yes, by becoming a priest."

"What's that got to do——"

"She's gone away to release herself from men, clawing men, from you, Champion, and from me."

"Mean she's—mean she's gone to that priest? But what can he——"

"We shan't see much more of her. Don't you think it, Champion! We are mixed up with the stage, you and I. We met her because of that. I found her—clawed at her—because of my play. I took her to you. And now you've been clawing at her for your own purposes."

"My own purposes! What the devil do you mean, Dale? I wanted a fine leading actress. I wanted——"

"You wanted her for your own purposes. We both put out our claws and tried to dig them into her. But she's escaped from us. We drove her too far. We dug our claws into her too deep. And she couldn't bear it any more. I know. I understand it all."

"But what the devil's she going to do? She told me last night she was going to marry you."

"Oh, no!"

"But she swore she would marry you."

"She won't. I understand it all now. I understand why she came to my house, why she waited for me to come home, why she looked at me as she did when—I understand."

"Well, I damned well don't! She's bound to me for five years——"

"You can't bind her. That's just where you're wrong; in thinking you can bind a woman like that."

"But she's signed with me!"

"And didn't she sign with Carrie Geean?"

"I'm not going to be jockeyed like old Carrie Geean. I've got where I am by making people do what I want 'em to do. I've——"

"Champion!"

"What is it?"

"You know Valentine pretty well by now, not really well, not thoroughly, but let's call it pretty well. D'you remember when she was first here, rehearsing, and you offered her thirty pounds a week for the run?"

"Do I not?"

"She refused it. You said you'd get another actress for the part."

"Well? Get on with it!"

"Did you get another actress for the part?"

Champion was silent.

"D'you remember later on when she demanded a full rehearsal under conditions laid down by her?"

"What the devil's the good of pulling out all this old stuff at——"

"D'you remember her saying 'I've made up my mind that either I'll have that rehearsal to-morrow or I'll go out of the cast'?"

"What earthly——"

"Didn't you give her that rehearsal?"

Champion thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and mechanically turned towards the window. He was confronted by the sheet of ground glass.

"Damn!" he said, swinging round.

"Neither you nor I can break Valentine's will once she's made up her mind, Champion. You've told me what happened in your house last night. But I'm quite sure you haven't told me all that happened. Perhaps I can make a pretty good guess at some of the rest."

Champion shifted heavily from one foot to the other but said nothing.

"Anyhow," Dale said, after waiting an instant for the words that didn't come, "you either said the one word too much, or you did the one thing too much. That's certain. And now—well, she'll never come back to you—never."

"What'll she do then?"

"What she's written in that letter to you—leave the stage."

Leave the stage! And if she leaves the stage how in hell's she going to live? She hasn't got a bean."

"That's not true. Even now that she's paid you she'll have enough left over probably to settle up her other debts."

"And after that? If she don't marry you? Is she going to walk the streets?"

"Champion, there are ways of living that don't cost much money."

"For a woman like that. Get along with you! What ways?"

Dale didn't reply.

"If she don't get a man to look after her——"

"Drop that beastliness!"

"Beastliness! Mean to tell me men haven't looked after her? What about that kid of hers?"

"It was she who supported her child without any man's help. Drop that!"

"Mean to put it up to me Trever never had anything to do with her? Go on!"

"She never had a penny from Trever!" said Dale, fiercely.

"You know a lot, don't——" began Champion.

He stopped abruptly and stared.

"Perhaps you know who was the kid's father. I'll bet you do. It wasn't—don't mean to tell me it was Trever?"

"Miss Morris has a right to keep her secrets. She hasn't asked me to tell her yours."

Champion stood for a moment as if in deep thought. The savagery, Dale noticed, had gradually died down in him, had been replaced by a sombre, almost deadly gravity.

"Dale," he said at last, pushing his big head up as if with an effort after his customary determination. "Tell me! What d'you think she's going to do?"

"She's deeply religious."

"Religious! In London they called her the dancing Valentine!"

"How much does all London know about what we really are, down in the depths of us? I think—I have the feeling that what's called the world will see no more of Valentine. The world and its claws—I don't think they'll be able to keep hold of Valentine much longer. Oh, what selfish beasts we are even in our poor attempts to be unselfish!"

Something in Dale—perhaps it was his unself-consciousness and even terrible sincerity at that moment—seemed to impress, almost to overwhelm, Champion. For he stood as one cowed, looking down on the short-legged man at whom he had sneered in that last scene with Valentine.

"I think," Dale added, "she's gone to enter a life where our claws can't reach her."

"Enter a life? What d'you mean, boy?"

"I may be wrong, but I think Valentine's probably made up her mind to enter the religious life."

Champion opened his mouth, but no words came from him. Dale stood for a moment. Then he took his hat and went out.

CHAPTER LIII

TEN days later Dale, now just established in the house in Wilton Crescent, received by the late evening post one letter. The large square envelope was sealed and marked "Private" in Valentine's handwriting.

"Thanks," Dale said, as he took the letter from a maid—the Macfarlanes were still in Tedworth Square, packing up and seeing to "the move"—"I shan't want anything more to-night. I don't wish to be disturbed."

"Very well, sir."

"Good-night," he added in a final way.

"Good-night, sir."

The maid went out and closed the door.

Dale was alone in the large ground floor room which had been the scene of Valentine's house-warming party. And now he was the owner of it and he was going to read a letter from Valentine in it. How extraordinary! He looked round the room, a woman's room which he would have to make some changes in. He looked at the letter he was holding. And he thought:

"Anything may happen."

It was summer now. The evening was warm. The windows were open. One lamp was burning, a lamp set low on a table. For darkness was not fully come. It was only about nine o'clock. Dale felt very much alone in the world, very lonely with the letter from Valentine. He had no hope that the letter would be kind to him, would say, "I am coming back. You will see me again very soon—to-morrow—the day after to-morrow." Through the past days he had waited for some words from Valentine. But none had come to him. Yet he had known that presently she would communicate with him. She wouldn't fail to do that. Of course she owed him an explanation. But also she had a feeling for him, a regard for him. Even she cared for him. She didn't care in the way he wanted. But she cared in another, genuine way.

At last a letter had come.

He sat down near the open window with his back to the lamp, and tore the envelope after breaking the big seal. As he put the envelope down he saw on it the post-mark of

Birmingham, and Father Bexland came up before him. He unfolded the letter.

"MARTIN DEAR,

"I want to make you understand. It doesn't matter much what *people* think. They think so many wicked, senseless, criminal things, don't they? I have never minded what they think, and I don't mind now. They seem very far away from me, they and their thoughts, thoughts that bow them down to the mud and the dust. But you are different, Martin. There is beauty in your mind. I believe you often think beautifully, and that's rare either in man or woman. And you've been beautifully friendly to me. Yes, you wanted more of me than friendship, I know. But in spite of that, Martin, you have given me very beautiful friendship. And you have understood me in a way that has often touched me very much. It is so unusual, I think, for anyone to be kindly understood. Do you know what I mean? Kindly! One is very often cruelly understood. But kindly! I have an ugly side. But you have looked so often at my other side, the side where the sun was, and you have looked with understanding. You were always appreciating the little bits of good in me, the better things, dear Martin. And in one thing I sometimes felt you were great. That was in forgiving me for not loving you. It is so difficult to forgive the not loving of another. But I think you were able to do even that. And now I'm not going to ask you to forgive me for the last time. For this is the last time, Martin. I'm not going to ask you because I know beforehand you will do it. So well I know you, and so much I believe in you.

"I am going to enter the religious life, Martin. I shall become a nun. I shall soon, very soon, have given up the world. That is the accepted description of what I am going to do. So I use it. But what is 'the world?' Is it only night clubs, the stage, the sensualities of love? Are we to limit it, Martin? I don't feel that I am giving up the world. And yet it would not be true to say that I am doing this that I am going to do without any regrets, or any sorrow, or any doubts. There is work I should have liked to do upon the stage. There are things I should like to have tried to show. There are things, not ordinary things, that I feel I could have shown. You may feel

beauty but you may not be able, not have the power, to reveal beauty. I think perhaps I have some power to reveal. And I know I feel beauty. But I have what I sometimes think of as a cancelling quality in me, Martin. I have an excess of animality. And it is really that—perhaps—which has caused all my troubles, and which is causing me to give up my stage career just when I am really beginning it.

"A famous actress—not English—gave a lecture once. And in it she said that no actress could be great without being promiscuously sensual. She didn't put it quite like that, but that was really the meaning of what she said. It is not true, Martin. That woman had a vulgar mind, a soul that was very common. I call it a pavement soul. In order to see beauty clearly and to be able to reveal it to others it is not necessary to go down on all fours. It is possible—it has been proved possible—to grovel at moments and to be a priestess of beauty at moments. But to say that one must grovel before one can see and understand and reveal beauty is to say a lie.

"I have grovelled. But there has mysteriously come to me an intense desire never to grovel again. This desire, this intense desire, has taken possession of me. But though it has had the power to take possession of me it has not had the power to change my nature. It has not had the power to transform me. I still have ugly desires.

"And now I am going to shock you probably, Martin, and to make you very sad. But I feel I must do it. I feel such a desire to be sincere with you. What you most wanted of me I couldn't give you. But I give you what I shall never give to any other exactly as I give it to you, my sincerity.

"Martin, you took me to Champion. You found me in failure. You believed in me. And you brought me to Champion. You know how he treated me. You know more—you know how I treated him. He bullied and browbeat me. I stood up to him and defied him. He was coarse and brutal to me. You were there. You saw it, heard it, shrunk and shuddered under it. For you are terribly sensitive, Martin, more sensitive than most men are. Very few men are so sensitive as you are. I forced him to do certain things. I forced him to give me the salary I thought I ought to have. I forced him to give me the

kind of rehearsal I wanted. I imposed my conception of the character in your beautiful play upon him. I dominated him now and then, in important, vital moments, even before I was known or had any success. You looked on. You shuddered. You took my part. You grew hot in defence of me. Did you ever suspect, Martin, that through all this, and in spite of all this—for I felt towards Champion, and I thought of Champion, what I told you I felt and thought—did you ever suspect that Champion attracted me, Martin? I don't believe you did. I don't believe anyone did. But so it was, and I always knew it. A secret thing in me, an ugly thing in me was always attracted by him. It was the part of me which I am sure you cannot understand. You may forgive it, perhaps. But you cannot understand it. I don't understand it myself. And the reason why I don't seems to me to be this: that my body desires what my brain, and my taste, and my sense of beauty, and even what I call my soul, criticise and reject and revolt from and are antagonistic to. How can that be? But it is. What draws my brain, what draws my artistic part, the part of me that seeks a worthy ideal, the part of me that must try to rise, ever to rise, that doesn't draw my body at all. And so I am full of disharmonies—always of disharmonies, of jangling strings, of false notes, of dreadful unresolved discords.

"I'm sure Champion didn't suspect this that I have told you at first. But he is a man who has had great experience of women. He is not like you, Martin. Your brain may detect. But his animal *knows*. There's the difference. Although I knew from the very first that Champion was of the type which inevitably gained a response from my body I really detested him. I detested him until that day in the managers' room when he told me before you all that I had beaten him, had beaten his—what shall I call it?—his managerial antagonism to me by my art. You remember—when he left the room I cried? From that moment I didn't detest Champion. I had found something in him which *knew*, something which wasn't physical. He had two strings then to pull at me with.

"But I trampled on him. You know how, when I had the chance, I trampled on him. I was a success. The theatre couldn't do without me. I am sure you thought me very vulgar and horrid in the hour of my triumph,

Martin. I think I should have been different to Champion in that hour if he hadn't attracted me physically. But I resented my body's feelings about him bitterly. And so I punished him. I nicknamed him Caliban. I wouldn't have him and his wife in my house when they wanted to come. Even when they begged to come I wouldn't have them. I did all I could to make them hate me. But I knew that Champion in his hatred had a very strong feeling of desire for me. I told you he was the wolf man. Something in each of us understood something in the other, through all the misunderstanding, and the hostility, and the feminine cruelty, and the spite, and the frigid politeness. Our two uglinesses understood each other mysteriously.

"Why did I leave him? Why did I leave the theatre? That was because of Mark Trever's renewal of power over me. I had belonged to Mark Trever, and I had never been able entirely to release myself from him. You know what I mean by that. For years I had had nothing to do with him. But when I was thrown with him again it all came back upon me—that old obsession.

"Martin, I must tell you now that at certain times in my life, even before all this, I have been gnawed at by a queer desire—in a woman such as I am such a desire must seem queer, I think—for purity, for aloofness, for silence, for what I once called to you *awayness*. It has come and it has gone. But always it has come again. Sometimes it has come like a voice from a distance summoning me to a life which I had never yet known, but which something in the depths of me persistently desired, calling me from afar to a great experience, which only the few could undergo, but which I was fitted for in spite of the life I had led, in spite of my recklessness, in spite of my sensuality. It is very strange but I think it is the fact that the sense of the spiritual is often very much alive in just those people in whom the animal propensities are exceptionally strong. while those who are almost free from sensuality are often free, too, from any intensity of spiritual desire and aspiration. I can't go into details, Martin, even to you, to whom I am writing as sincerely as I can, but often after what I call grovelling, immediately after, I have heard most distinctly the sound of the distant voice. And it seemed to be telling me that my happiness was not, and never could

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be, where I had been seeking it, that I was the victim of a profound illusion in supposing that the satisfaction of my physical part could ever content me, that, for me, ultimate happiness lay in complete release from physical pleasures, in the absolute and final giving up of the very thing that dominated me.

"Have you ever been violently pulled up in the course of your life, Martin? There seems brutality in it. It is as if a tremendous hand descended upon you, seized you, held you, stopped you, made you stand rigidly still and stare into darkness.

"I felt the tremendous hand when Brian died.

"You were away. Perhaps if you hadn't been away I could have told you how it was with me then. I can't now. I didn't suffer as the ordinary, good, loving, self-sacrificing mother suffers when her only child dies. I suffered in quite a different way, as a bad mother, who nevertheless has loved, suffers when she loses her only child. I felt contrition, remorse. I feel them still. And I felt more strongly than ever before the contamination of my life, the desire not to grovel again, never to grovel any more.

"I wrote to tell Carrie Geean and Mark that I must be away from the theatre for a time. But then I couldn't bear the nothingness—agonising in nothingness with Brian there in the house no longer Brian. And I felt I must work or lose all self-control. So I went to the theatre. There I had the complete revelation of what I had subdued myself to, of how low I had grovelled. There I saw my monster in blinding light. And I was part of it. Oh Martin, that was most terrible! Have you ever thought what it would be to see your double? I had the sensation that I saw my double naked and covered with leprosy. And Mark was in it with me. And Brian seemed to be in it too.

"When I came away from the theatre that evening I had an almost irresistible longing to give up the stage, to leave it, for another, totally different life, which I had often thought about, spoken about with my friend, Father Bexland, and even prayed and meditated about. (I use the word, meditation, as a priest would use it.) Brian was gone. I hadn't to think of and work for his future. My mother has a small income. It is very small but she

could just live on it. But I had been reckless with money. And I had debts. It seemed that I must go on, for a time at any rate, in the theatrical life which was becoming hateful to me.

"And so, after mental struggles and communings which I won't describe to you, I did what you know.

"Champion stepped in. He had been waiting all this time, and probably with the certainty that in the end I should go back to him. I tied myself to Champion. I didn't do it without hesitation, fear, a sense of inward rebellion, Martin. I have had nights in the dark by the sea all alone——

"Under my wilfulness and determination and authority—for I know I have a native authority which is part of me—I have something weak in me that in certain moments betrays me. Many women have a similar weakness, I think. It is, perhaps, a curious sort of slave instinct connected with the body. And it manifests itself only in connection with a certain type of man. Mark Trever belongs to that type. And Champion belongs to that type, too. And you don't, dear Martin. It is a slave instinct, I believe, connected with sensuality, a betraying slave instinct, a curious morbid desire for physical subservience.

"Can you understand such a thing, Martin? I often felt it with Mark Trever. I have felt it with Champion. I have never felt it with you. And yet I put you far above those two. You are fine and delicate and sensitive, quivering with sensitiveness. And they are—well you know what they are! But there is a conquering principle in them for women like me that you haven't got. I think you are too unselfish ever to conquer. You think of the other. Those men always think of themselves. Their savage egotism makes a great impression on women of a certain type, Martin.

"But I was afraid and wretched when I signed with Champion. And directly I had signed I felt myself a prisoner. It was as if I heard an iron door shut on me and knew that my sentence was for five years.

"That dreadful dinner, after you came back, Martin! You will never know what I felt on that evening when we dined with the Champions. I can tell you—and yet I can't! You remember how exultant he was, full of

plans for the future. I sat there and heard them. And they were plans for me. And all the time something within me seemed to be saying 'What is the use of all this? What has all this to do with you? Why are you here? This isn't the place for you. It may be the life you once longed for, and dreamed of, and strove after desperately. But all that was long ago before you knew your true destiny.'

"While Champion was talking that night after dinner in the drawing-room I wondered why he didn't feel that he was talking to a stranger, to a woman who had utterly done with him and his projects for her, and who was listening to him with a terrible irony. He was half tipsy of course. But still—but he didn't.

"Oh that night there! The furniture, the flowers, the cushions, the colours, the men-servants, Mrs. Champion's dress and jewels and paint and hair and smile! His roaring exuberance! There are waking nightmares, Martin! I looked at you once. And it seemed to me that my look frightened you. 'Away with all this!' That's what I was thinking. 'Away with it all and with these two human beings; this vinegary, smiling, genteel, pretentious, untrue woman, and this noisy, blustering man, full of horribly rich, sticky food and wine and brandy!'

"I ought not to write like this, Martin. Father Bexland could never write hardly, unkindly, brutally of anyone. And I ought not to. But that is exactly what I was thinking and feeling that night, that and many other underthings which I could never put into words even to you. And that night there came upon me as if with a panther's leap the thought, 'I shall have to get out of this, to get away from all this, to put an impassable barrier between myself and all this.' My real self, my deep-down self, the self far down under the actress and all her desires in art, and all her ambitions in art, said to me, 'You cannot be connected with this man who is shouting about what he is going to do for you, and do with you, and what he is going to make of you. You cannot stay with him for five years. No, nor for four, nor three, nor two, nor even for one year. Such a thing isn't possible and you know it isn't possible.'

"Just when I was going Champion said—do you remem-

ber?—' No more dancing till three and four o'clock in the morning! We've got to be careful of you now. Looks mean a lot in the theatre. We'll take care of yours. From now on you belong to——' There he stopped. Perhaps my eyes made him stop. He had meant to say—' From now on you belong to me.' He didn't say it. But I knew.

" Then you took me to the hotel and you asked me to marry you. And I told you something of what I am. I hurt you terribly, Martin. The wound went to the bone. Still I was truthful. I had to be truthful to *you*. And you spoke of Father Bexland. When you did that I felt as if my soul got up to defend him. And yet you hadn't really attacked him. I know you had no intention to attack him, Martin. It was just—but my soul got up just the same. I'm not sure, but I almost think it was at that moment that I knew I was meant for religion, that moment in which I divided the priest man from all the men not priests. And you trembled with bitter emotion, Martin. I can see you trembling now. And you went. But you held me for a moment first. And I knew how you loved me. And I had been so cruel to you. And in return you loved me, you went on loving me. There is something very fine in you, Martin, finer than anything in me. There's a selflessness that I haven't got.

" I sent my cheque in payment of my debt to Champion. This is what happened, briefly. He begged me over the telephone to come and dine again. He gave me the invitation as if it was his wife's wish and her idea. I hesitated to go. I remembered the dreadful evening just over. He spoke about my cheque. He said he didn't want it. He said he wouldn't pay it into his bank till he saw me. I felt that he wouldn't. Perhaps it was best to go. I went. His wife wasn't there. He had lied. She was away and knew nothing of my coming. But I stayed—not to make a scene. It was useless for a woman such as I am to play the virgin or the prude. Even my sense of the ridiculous told me that. After dinner Champion tried to force me to take my cheque back, I refused naturally. He found out the money I had came from you, that I preferred to be helped by you, Martin, instead of by him. He was passionately angry. He attacked me. He told me—it doesn't matter what he told me, but some of it

was true. I said you had my things. But then, Martin, he lashed my humbug. For wasn't it humbug? Certainly you had all my things, but all the same that money—wasn't it in truth a gift from you to me, dear Martin, dear friend? He showed me up, Martin, to myself. He made me feel very small. And then, leaving the money, he told me some terrible, brutal truths about my sensual self. He stripped me naked, Martin. It was like that. He was brutally coarse to me. And you know what his coarseness is. But this time it was passionate coarseness—as when a man shouts out his soul in the gutter for all the passers by to hear. And in his passionate coarseness he found truths, terrible truths to tell me about myself. He insulted me—with the truth!

"It is terrible to be insulted with the truth. It is the last insult, Martin.

"While Champion was pouring forth upon me this scalding stream of truth I sat quite still and listened, and everything that he said which was true, however loathsome, my mind accepted and my heart seemed in some strange, mysterious way to bear witness to. And in me a voice was assenting. I could hear it saying, 'Yes, it is so. He knows you. As you have grovelled so has he grovelled. He could tell you many things, many more things, about your secret ugly life, and all of them would be true.' And I knew that I was kindred to this man, as, say, Jew is kindred to Jew, through all differences of character and station and education and mental powers and rejections. I knew that this man and I had in the past often walked on the same plane.

"But, Martin, I resolved that never again would I walk on that plane. I formed this resolve while I listened to him, and when he finished I thought it was of iron. And then, Martin, he changed. His mind had been violently at work. But then suddenly his body took charge. He sat down beside me. He touched me. He put his arm round me. After his terrible attack, and with the complete self-confidence of a man who *knows* what a woman is in a certain way, he began to tempt me. And, Martin, I was tempted. Yes, in spite of all, in spite of my mental abhorrence, and my soul-disgust, and my longing for purity and awayness, something in me was tempted. It wanted to yield. It desired just what Champion desired.

"Other things happened. They are really of no importance. Champion made a false step which stirred up antagonism in me. That was a terrible mistake from his point of view. And then Mrs. Champion came in with some friends unexpectedly. There was a horrible scene, a sordid scene after the friends had gone. It was about money. And I saw that married life bare to its bones. And it seemed to me that I suffered the last degradation. I went away. I escaped from that hideous marriage. And as I escaped I knew that if I had signed a hundred contracts with Champion I should break them all. I went to you. I can't tell you why, Martin. I can never tell you why. I waited in your house alone. And it was night. And the mind works at night in a special way, as it doesn't work in daylight. While I waited my mind was working, taking me away from where I had been, driving me far away from a path I had thought, perhaps, to tread.

"When you came at last and I saw you, dear Martin, I *had* to say good-bye to you. I *had* to do that, because I had somehow at last got down to absolute sincerity.

"Never ask me to explain, Martin. Never ask me to tell you any more about that.

"What I am going to do will astonish many people, will amaze the crowd. Perhaps it will amaze even you. But the voice is very clear to me now. I have no hesitation in following it. I am a Catholic. I have always been a Catholic. And faith is in me, ingrained in me, part of me. I couldn't not believe—just as you couldn't believe. As instinctively as I suppose you reject—I accept. And there can be no half measure for a woman like me once she has been shown herself exactly as she is. People will say, 'Why did she do it? How could she do it? She must be mad. She will never endure that life. She's hysterical. Some hypnotic priest has got hold of her.' Oh, I can hear them, Martin! But, searching very sincerely for the exact truth of this matter, very great and vital to me, of supreme importance to me, I find it in this that I am going to tell you now. I am giving up the world, so-called, because I know I cannot go on living in it without degrading myself. Champion has succeeded in proving that to me, as even Mark Trever couldn't prove it. It is my terrible weakness which is driving me to do what perhaps you, and others, will think is a strong thing. In the world,

out in the ordinary life, my body is uncontrollable. I am going to put it where it will be controlled, where, in the end—I am sure of this, Martin—it will be educated into complete accord with my other part, with my soul.

"When that happens I shall know what true happiness is; never till then.

"Good-bye, dear Martin. You have loved a woman who has something in her worth loving, and who wishes to destroy all the rest that is not worth loving, and that a man such as you are cannot love.

"VALENTINE"

* * * * *

When he had finished reading Valentine's letter Dale turned out the lamp and sat alone in the gradually increasing darkness of the soft summer night. The mystery of life was upon him wrapping him round. He was confronted by the inexorable like a man face to face with death. But was the mystery of death any greater than the mystery of life? Valentine and her faith—himself and his un-faith! She had been very sincere to him. But she had not told him all. He saw her eyes in the night, as they had looked at him when she left him on the step of his house in Tedworth Square. In those eyes had been her real good-bye to him.

He was bowed down with grief and regret. He felt stricken and could not see that there was any future for him. His life seemed to have stopped, to stand rigidly still in the darkness. Yet he forgave her absolutely, for not loving him and for going away where he would never see more of her. She attributed his power of forgiveness to some greatness in him. But it wasn't something in him which forced him to forgive. No, it was something in her.

He forgave her because she was Valentine.

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